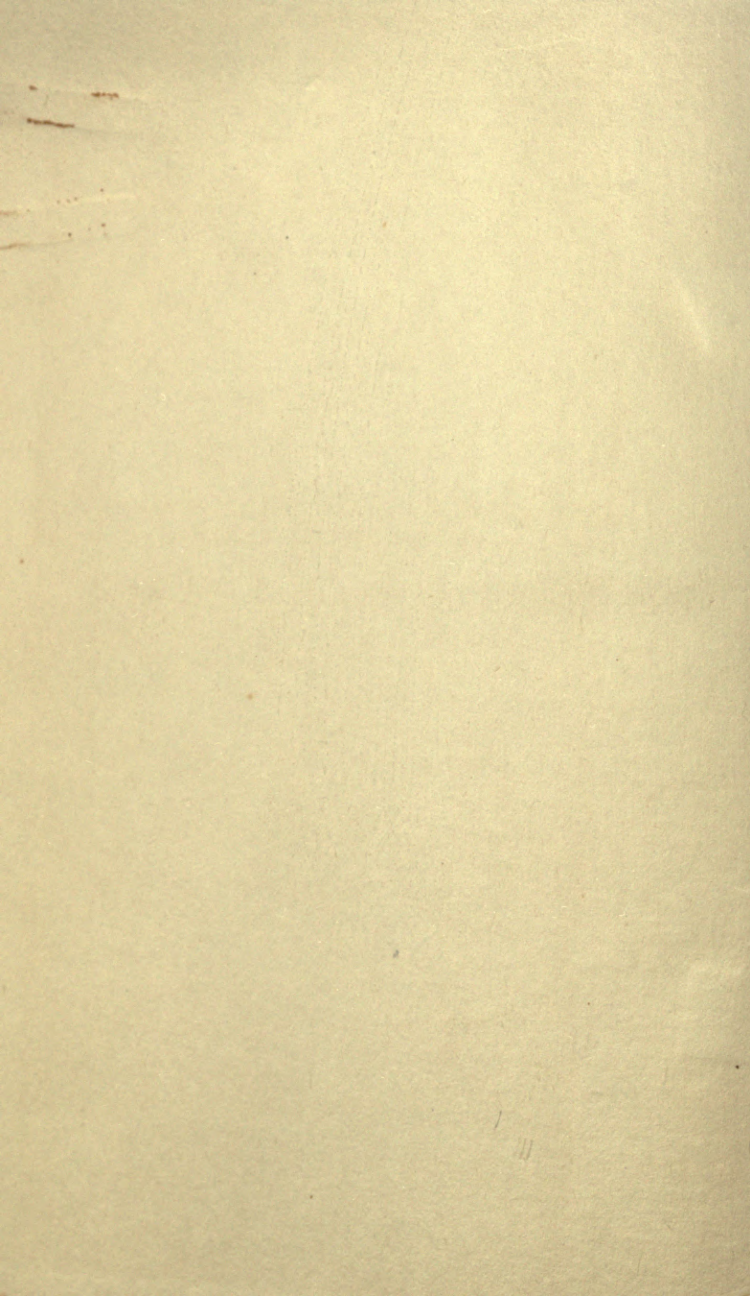


Doris Raymond
East Melbourne

1915



THE MARRIAGE OF EDWARD

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By
LOUISE MACK

Author of
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THE MARRIAGE OF EDWARD

LOUISE MACK

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DEDICATORY.

Dear Miss Bown,—

You have been fairy god-mother to so many of my brain-children, that, in accepting the dedication of this one, you are merely carrying on your sweet tradition of unvarying kindness, unvarying interest—kindness and interest which have done so much to help so many women-writers, among them

*Yours ever gratefully
and affectionately,*

LOUISE MACK.

Adelphi Terrace,
1912.

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CHAPTER I

"CHILDREN DEAR, WAS IT YESTERDAY?"

"ANY more tea, Sandy?"

"Yes, please."

"Oh you *can't*, Sandy, that was your sixth!"

"Rats!"

"Squeeze the teapot, Alice. Here's some more hot water. Here, let me stir!"

"Sit down!"

"Mind who you're hitting with the spoon!"

"Pass the tea-cake!"

"Say 'please'!"

"Pass the tea-cake and jam!"

"Really, you boys are awful! That's Sandy's fourth cup of tea, and four plates of bread-and-butter, and two whole tea-cakes, and a great big currant loaf, and two toast-racks of toast, and a dozen iced cakes, and every one of them disappeared!"

"What's the odds? Alice is going to marry Money-Bags. There's *oof* coming into this family! We're going to roll and welter in coin, every one of us, from the governor downwards!"

Golden-haired Alice, sitting at the end of the school-room table pouring out tea for them all, flushed painfully and then grew very pale. Her lips trembled. Her eyelashes came sweeping down on her cheeks like curtains. Her grey eyes went miserably to her plate

while the others watched her in amazement. What on earth was the matter with her now? All day she had been funny—not like herself at all. Anybody could see that something was wrong. Red-haired Sandy stopped in the act of conveying an enormous slice of buttered tea-cake to his mouth, and a change came over his meagre, freckled face. He looked round at his brothers and scowled. “Dry up, dry up, you chaps,” he said. “Look here, who’s coming down to the stables to look at poor old Quilter’s foot? I’ve had enough tea for one. I’m full up. So you ought to be, Bags. And you, too, Curt-Bird. Come along with me now!”

He gathered them up in a masterful way—this twelve year old Sandy, otherwise Andrew Kenneth St. John—and managed also to manipulate the youngest of the family as well, yclept Fat Girl, who toddled seriously along at Sandy’s side, only too happy to accept the privilege of going with her big brothers to the stables.

In the great old-fashioned fireplace a big fire burnt redly, the pine-logs giving out a haunting fragrance that seemed to wander incongruously among the maps and algebras and compasses, the *Via Latina*, the *Peter the Great*, the *Bradley’s Prose* and the *Stepping Stones to Knowledge*, lying massed in careless heaps on the side tables of the bare schoolroom. Through the long windows, bare of curtains, the gardens could be seen, where early trees were breaking into brave green now, and the first lilacs were showing their delicate mauve blossoms. An age-old yew stood darkly against the tender olive green of the young laburnum-grove, where the robins were nesting happily.

Under these stretched a wide, clipped lawn, that alone of all the garden seemed to have escaped the touch of neglect evident everywhere else. "Whatever happened, Alexander St. John would always have his lawns in order.

Ariadne's voice came stealing timidly through the silence.

"Alice, are you happy?"

Pretty, fragile Alice St. John lifted her head and stared into her younger sister's face, and her expression was so peculiar and vacant that it filled Ariadne with a sudden sense of coming trouble.

"You are going to be married," she went on hurriedly. "Of course you must be happy."

But she looked frightened all the same, and the anxiety in her eyes deepened as she watched her sister's face.

"Everybody says so," she urged nervously. "Edward must be nice. I am sure he is." She paused again, her eyes fixed with an expectant look on Alice's down-cast eyelids. "I like Edward, Alice. He has such a kind, good face."

"Yes, he is very nice."

The words came dully from Alice's beautiful mouth, but no light swept across her expression.

Away in the distance, across the vast, happy-go-lucky garden, came the sound of voices, boys and girls, in animated controversies of some sort or other.

First the Curt-Bird's voice was upraised, for no one could shrill and shriek like the Curt-Bird when offended; then Fat Girl's strange hoarse cries were heard; then above all rose the loud authoritative tones of Sandy, who seemed to be assuring all and sundry that there

was no fear that something or somebody or other would do them any harm ; that Bill the stableman was only pretending when he threatened them with his pitchfork if they didn't get out of his way.

Suddenly Alice leaned her white arms, bare to the elbow, on the deal schoolroom table, and let her head droop down on them.

Her voice came muffled and broken.

"I've done my best . . . and he's so good . . . But—I *can't!*"

"*Can't!*"

"I'm marrying him to save you all!" went on Alice, as the last remnant of the forced composure that had carried her so pluckily through these past weeks gave way suddenly. "Father said it was that. If I refused we were ruined—all the lot of us, Sandy, Curt-Bird, Jocelyn, Margaret, Helen and Fat Girl, and you, Ariadne, and poor father himself, and the house and the garden and the dogs and the horses and everything and every one ; and so I promised. It wasn't so very hard, and Edward is so good and nice, but——"

She paused, choked with sobs, and her head lay in a desolate attitude right down against the schoolroom table where she had first leant to cross her t's and dot her i's—a knowledge that availed her little now, poor Alice !

Now, the family history of the St. John's, as far back as one could discover it, had presented a long series of romantic and impossible marriages, in all of which there had been much more than the usual amount of happiness, and far less than the usual amount of money, and perhaps that was why Ariadne found it so difficult to clear from her brain those mists of romance with

which she had been secretly mingling her thoughts about Alice's marriage. Desperately she tried to say something suitable, but could think of nothing that seemed worth uttering. “ But if you like him, Alice, and he is so nice, so good——” It took her a long, long time to produce even that stumbling and ineffective sentence.

Alice lifted her fair, pretty head and looked a little wildly at her sister.

“ I've cared for somebody else for years,” she said at last. “ It's Billy.”

“ *Billy !* ”

Ariadne's face grew pale.

“ But Billy's in India. He's been away four years. Alice, you must be *dreaming* ! ”

“ Am I ! ” fiercely. “ Well, dreaming or not, I'll never care for any one else. I don't mean that we were engaged, Billy and I, but we both *knew*. And it was for me he was working away all those years—for weak, unworthy me. When Edward asked me to marry him I tried to put it aside, to deaden my feelings. I succeeded, for father's sake, for your sakes ; but to-day something happened that seems to have waked me right up.”

She drew a letter out of her waistband, and held it towards her sister.

“ Read that ! ”

With trembling fingers Ariadne unfolded the sheet of thin foreign paper, and read aloud in a frightened voice : —

“ DARLING ALICE,—

“ By the time this reaches you I shall be almost

in England ; at any rate, I shall be on my way from Bombay ; and a few weeks afterwards I shall step out of a train and stand in the dear old roar of Charing Cross once more. . .”

The letter fell from Ariadne's hands.

“He's coming back !” she gasped.

“In a few weeks.”

“And he loves you and thinks you care.”

“Yes.”

“And you—you *do* care? Oh Alice, Alice ! Whatever shall we do ? ”

Alice wiped her eyes and tried to speak calmly.

“The whole show will go to pieces if I break off my marriage with Edward. Poor old daddy's creditors would come down on him with a bang, and out we'd all have to bundle, neck and crop—the whole lot of us ; for there'd be nothing else left to father but to sell the place, heavily mortgaged as it is. When that's done there'd be about tuppence left for us all to live on, and no home into the bargain. You see you've been dreaming all your life ! You've been living about in Germany with poor old half-crazed Aunt Anne. You've been out of it all, simply because Aunt Anne took a fancy to you and wanted somebody to travel with her. You've known nothing of what we've all been through. Even Sandy knows better than you—even Curt-Bird ! Yes, even darling little Fat Girl ! ”

“It was horribly dull with poor old Aunt Anne,” put in Ariadne defensively.

“Often, Ariadne,”—Alice's voice dropped to an almost sepulchral whisper—“often we haven't had

enough to eat. And as for clothes—why, surely even you, Ariadne, must have noticed the condition of our wardrobes ! You’ve seen that Sandy’s suits were made on the premises from old clothes of father’s, and Curt-Bird’s ditto, and Jocelyn’s ditto ! Surely you’ve noticed the state of our foot-gear ! ”

But here Ariadne hearing some one coming made a determined effort to brighten things up.

“ Thackeray says the foot is the first thing to betray one’s financial condition, poverty going to the extremities, as he puts it so airily in *Pendennis*. ”

“ Who’s quoting Thackeray ? ” said a voice.

In the doorway a big, fair-haired man had now appeared and stood looking in on the two girls.

“ Is anything the matter ? ” he asked hastily, noting their confusion.

“ Nothing ! ” stammered Ariadne.

Alice rose and slipped away, but not before Edward Harding had seen her red eyes.

He looked dismayed.

“ Is she—is she not well ? ” he asked of Ariadne.

Ariadne gathered herself together.

“ Brides always cry the day before their wedding, ” she told him.

Her manner was airy. He must not be alarmed.

“ You’re awfully like Alice, ” Edward Harding exclaimed suddenly.

She smiled.

“ Not so much now, ” he added quickly.

“ Lots of people never know one from the other, ” said Ariadne. “ Once when Alice and I were at a dance, a man came up to me and said, ‘ This is our dance, Miss St. John. ’ I didn’t know him, so I told

him he had made a mistake—it was my sister. Five minutes after he came up to me again in a different part of the room, laughed and said, ‘I just went up to your sister and claimed your dance; I thought she was you.’ When I told him he was still talking to the same Miss St. John he looked astounded. He said I seemed to have changed since that first conversation.”

“Yes, it’s the smile,” said Edward.

“Would you know us apart?” Ariadne looked serious.

“I couldn’t swear to it,” replied Edward, “unless you smiled *very* hard at me.”

He had a simple kindly manner that matched his square kindly face. All dogs liked him, and all children—to fall back on one of the most threadbare platitudes—a platitude, however be it marked, that no amount of research and metaphysics has ever yet been able to improve upon. Once, a certain peculiarly unfortunate love-affair had threatened to mar his life, but it was long since consigned to oblivion. He had filled his life with hard work, and latterly with adventurous expeditions in the interior of Africa and up north about Greenland, and those fascinating South Pole areas that beckon so many manly spirits. He had been away from England for years, and he bore the marks of absence from civilization about him in many little ways. There was a certain suggestion of abruptness and roughness about him that yet was, somehow, belied by the intensely kind expression of his shrewd but simple-looking eyes. His face was tanned with many suns, and so were his hands; but his blue eyes had something more than ordinary

intelligence in their depths, betraying him for one who was no mere pleasure-loving explorer. This was a man who did things seriously. He was just the sort of man, in fact, to whom a sensitive, lovely young girl like Alice St. John, who had all the domestic qualities, was sure to appeal.

" So you like Thackeray, do you ? "

" Yes. Do you ? "

" I'm afraid I can't quote him with your fluency."

" It's a bad habit of mine. But I don't often indulge in it." Ariadne was not going on, but she looked in his face and saw there the curious mental invitation which passes so mysteriously from one brain to another, bidding the guest to the banquet, and revealing the host in the act of welcome. So she finished her thought. " Most people are annoyed if you quote. They don't understand, they don't know. So it bores them."

" But when they do know, when they do understand how it delights them ! "

" I know it does me. Does it you ? "

Ariadne's eyes were sparkling.

" Of course it does. It shows me I'm in touch with a brain and a memory and a taste. Why, do you know you sent a positive thrill through me just now. When I heard you say the word ' Pendennis ' ; I wanted to come and shake hands with you."

Ariadne nodded delightedly.

" I know. It must be because he's a friend of both of ours," she said.

" Yet we are not contemporaries, you and I," with a sly twinkle. " I am forty. You are not quite forty yet, are you ? "

All this time he was standing, while Ariadne sat

in the old cane rocking-chair, bending forward as she looked up in his face.

It was the first time she had been alone with Edward Harding, and she was surprised to feel herself so much at home, for men as a rule were rather frightening quantities to Ariadne St. John, and unknown quantities also.

Edward leaned back against the schoolroom table. The difference between her face and Alice's was slowly coming home to him. Where Alice's expression was clinging, Ariadne's was fearless. Where Alice's eyes were gentle and sweet, Ariadne's gleamed with thought. Where Alice's lips parted charmingly over adorable white teeth, Ariadne had a smile so seductive, so bewildering that a man might be fairly forgiven for losing his head. It was a wild sweet smile, fraught with some mysterious suggestion of hidden light in the girl's brain.

"Well, who else do you like besides Thackeray?" Edward's voice was provocative, and Ariadne understood immediately that he wanted to talk, a condition of mind she well understood.

"Best of all I like Fogazzaro."

"Really, do you read Fogazzaro? He is an immense old person, isn't he?"

"I read him abroad," said Ariadne. "There I knew and understood him. Here in England I read him because he makes me feel I am abroad again. Whether or not it is fair to an author to like him for such reasons I don't know."

"Anything is fair that makes you love a person more."

By this time Ariadne was quite sure she liked Edward immensely.

She felt so at ease with him that she even found herself asking him, “ How did *you* come to like Fogazzaro ? ”

“ That’s rather a long story. You’d be surprised if I told you. I made his acquaintance up in the Arctic regions. That’s the truth. We had an Italian engineer with us some years ago and we lent each other books to wile away the winter. He lent me Fogazzaro. He taught me Italian too. A curious experience it was, up there in those white ice-regions—wandering in thought among the sunlit orange groves of the South, listening to hot-blooded men and women fighting over love, religion, food, children, while all about one stretched those blank uninhabited regions. There are always such fiery struggling crowds in Fogazzaro’s books. They seemed to make the silence and bareness of the North curiously vivid.”

As he spoke he saw the pictures that were fleeting over her brain, and by her eyes he knew she was looking at those white ice-regions too.

“ Do you play ? ” he asked her abruptly. “ Some one was making music here after lunch.”

“ Yes, it was I.”

“ I wish you’d play something for me now. Will you ? ”

After a moment’s hesitation, which was not reluctance to play, but a distinct aversion to ending their conversation, Ariadne went to the piano, but as she opened it, and before her fingers touched the keys, the scene with Alice came back to her startlingly, and she realized that for the last ten minutes she had forgotten all about it.

This nice, kind, clever man who liked Thackeray

and Fogazzaro, and with whom she felt so curiously at ease, suddenly assumed the aspect of a victim at a sacrifice.

Her fingers drifted into a fugue by Bach. Seeking the motive, she found and proclaimed it, and her clear yet velvety touch filled Edward Harding with delight. On and on she went—she and her fugue—following the motive, chasing it when it fled, haunting it through intricate places, climbing with it at last high up into mountain air and sunshine, till the shabby old school-room was turned into a sanctuary. Everything petty and worldly was swept right out of the atmosphere by the purity of that music, the fineness of its construction, the nobility of its metaphysics.

Edward rose and came close to the old piano. He stood there, a large, still figure in tweeds, looking down at Ariadne's little white hands on the keys.

But suddenly the notes faded away under her touch.

The beauty of the fugue and the misery of the thoughts that were stabbing her had suddenly leapt into deadly antagonism.

She could not go on, she had to stop.

She looked up. Her lip quivered. The intellect retreated. The child advanced.

"What on earth is the matter?" her prospective brother-in-law asked in amazement.

"I can't play any more."

"But why do you look like that? My dear child, what's troubling you? What is it? Do you know that you look the very picture of woe?"

If only she dared to tell him!

The music was in her brain still, and its influence was working on her soul. The meanness of letting

this man go blindfold into danger without reaching a little finger to stop him made her hate herself.

"Ariadne, you are frightfully worried about something."

Edward stooped, and laid a kindly hand on her shoulder.

"We don't know each other very well," he said, "but still, we've agreed we are both great friends of old 'Pendennis,' and soon you are going to become my sister. I wonder if you couldn't tell me what it is that's worrying you?"

A more persuasive voice Ariadne had never heard.

"Do tell me if there is anything I can do," he went on. "Think of me as your brother . . . Remember I am going to have Alice to take care of for all her life, and do let me take care of you too, Ariadne—that is to say, if you have any need of taking care of."

"Oh, it isn't *me*, it's *you*!" she cried wildly. "You are so good and kind! Alice ought to tell you—she *must* tell you!"

She sprang up and made a movement towards the door, but Edward caught her and held her by the wrist.

"You can't go," he said. "You've got to explain yourself."

But before she could speak Alice herself had opened the door and was entering, her face carefully washed, her eyes bathed, and a little softening powder applied to hide the ravages of her tears.

"Alice, come here!" cried Edward Harding sharply.

Alice stood petrified in the doorway, looking from one to the other, and divining instantly from their faces what had happened.

"Come here and explain to me what it is that

Ariadne is saying. I don't know what it is, but something is causing this child frightful distress, and she says it is connected with myself."

"Tell him, Alice!" pleaded a low and trembling voice.

Edward crossed the room deliberately, closed the door and locked it, then came back to the two sisters. He had grown a little pale. But his pallor was nothing compared to that of the two girls before him.

"Now, let us have the truth," he said.

But Alice turned away despairingly and went and leaned against the mantelpiece, her back to the room.

"Come, *you've* got grit," said Edward, looking at Ariadne, "you can tell it to me."

She braced herself.

"Yes, it has to be told," she said, "it's this. Alice ought not to marry you to-morrow. She cares for another man, and he's coming back from India in a few weeks."

Edward looked at her speechlessly.

"She only knew to-day that he was coming back," said Ariadne, by way of softening her sister's errors.

She put her hands out impulsively and caught Edward by the arm, overcome by a sudden longing to touch him, to soften the blow, to force him to feel her pity.

He turned and looked towards Alice.

"Alice, why didn't you tell me?"

That was absolutely the only sentence of reproach Edward Harding ever uttered, but it was apparently too much for Alice, for she went towards the door, unlocked it and slipped away, Edward making no effort to restrain her.

Then between the two in the schoolroom rose a great silence—a silence as cold, and lonely, and desolate as any on those bleak northern wastes that Edward had been describing.

" Why was she going to marry me ? " said Edward at last.

" Surely you can guess."

" Don't tell me it was *money* ! "

" Yes."

Luckily Ariadne had had no experiences whatever of affairs of the heart, and her imagination forced on her no distorted pictures of Edward's probable sufferings. She was like a young doctor handling a first case. All she thought of was the result ; so she deliberately and conscientiously told him everything.

CHAPTER II

“ I LIKE YOU AWFULLY ! ”

A FROWN had settled on Edward Harding's forehead, and the contracted brows above the blue eyes showed how puzzled he was. He was the man in the case. It was for him to act. And he was the sort of man who could and would act. All of a sudden there surged up in his brain something of that old invincible feeling that had spurred him on through many an adventure in the jungle, when he was hunting tigers, or out in the Rockies after bears, or in those desolate regions where endurance and persistence and pluck are the only factors that have any meaning. He had had many a tough quarter of an hour with wild beasts and hardships. But this situation was the toughest. And yet, just because it was so extraordinarily difficult, the determination grew in him to master it.

His lips tightened, for he was a man who loathed gossip and scandal above all things.

After all—well, after all, how did he *feel*? That was the question. Was he heart-broken? Was he plunged in despair? He began to wonder about it. He took out his watch and glanced at it, then looked up at the white-faced girl in the corner. His eyes softened, she appeared so very pathetic and frightened,

just like a child who awaits a whipping ; he felt touched at the sweetness and pity in her looks.

The moments went ticking by, ticking by, and Edward Harding, walking up and down the room, frowned and pondered and squared his shoulders, to face the apparent ruin that lay about his life.

"Listen, Ariadne. Don't look like that. Let me tell you the plain truth. I feel that this is the time for it. I cared for Alice very, very much, yet the loss doesn't seem to altogether overwhelm me. There now, I've said it ! The thing is just how to make the best of the matter, and that is what I'm trying to find out."

She looked at him wonderingly, struck by what seemed to her the most extraordinary patience and reasonableness she had ever encountered, but he was off again, pacing the schoolroom, up and down, up and down, his lips set very tight.

"Tell me," he said suddenly, pausing in front of Ariadne, "what did you mean just now by saying if only it had been you, instead of Alice. . . . Do you mean that you, unlike Alice, are heart-whole ? That you don't care for anybody ?"

"I suppose so. . . . Yes, . . . I suppose that's what I meant."

He sat down beside her on the sofa, and as he did so he was asking himself why should he not control the circumstances of this affair so decisively that the world should know nothing about it ?

"I want to talk to you . . . you're reasonable . . . you have common-sense." He spoke in as quiet and matter-of-fact a voice as he could command, while his eye went searching sharp and deep into the hidden

things that lay behind the sweet, girlish, sorrowful face.

Somehow he dared not tell her yet that already, even in their one brief talk, he had found something in her that Alice had never been able to give him ; which was a sense of comradeship combined with a curious feeling of stimulus. Alice's beauty and gentleness had won his tenderness and admiration, for a rich man very often desires unconsciously nothing better than to spend his wealth on a sweet and beautiful woman, and so it was that Edward had never realized that Alice might be accepting him for his money. It was her domestic qualities that had beckoned to him, whispering of a haven at her side. But Ariadne, though so extraordinarily like her sister, affected him quite differently. It was as he had said. When he heard her quote *Pendennis*, he wanted to shake hands with her, and when he heard her play Bach he began to suspect that this girl had it in her power to create a new and beautiful world for him—or recreate this old one.

"An idea has come to me which seems to offer a possible solution of our difficulty," he went on gently. She looked at him in wonder.

"First, say to yourself this—that Alice was willing to marry me, so I can't be exactly an ogre ! . . ."

"An ogre ! I *know* you are not an ogre ! I—I—I like you awfully !"

"Do you really, Ariadne ? Is that true ?"

"Yes. It's quite true. I like you *awfully* !"

"Then I wonder could you possibly do it, Ariadne ? Could you take Alice's place ? That is the idea that has come to me."

"I! Take Alice's place! How do you mean?"

"I mean marry me."

"Marry you!"

"Yes."

He watched her quietly.

"But you—you hardly know me!" she stammered out at last.

"Remember *Pendennis*."

"Ah! . . . Yes!"

And indeed that had a significance for her—he saw at once, with delight he saw it, and the delight was heightened by the fact that she had immediately entered into his meaning.

"If you don't dislike me," he went on quietly, "and if you don't care about any one else, it seems to me that things might quite well be expected to come out right in the end. For the life of me I can't see why they shouldn't. And till then, till you have had a fair and full chance to know me and I have had a fair and full chance to know you—my suggestion is that after our marriage, we should spend our time making each other's acquaintance." Then he added solemnly, if awkwardly, "I shall take care of you in every way. I hope you will believe that."

"Why, I—I feel by just looking at you that you're good. But to marry you——! Marriage!" she sighed. "Oh marriage is such a big, big thing, isn't it? I mean it lasts for ever. Marriage! . . . I can't imagine myself married."

"But I suppose you believe that some day you will marry some one?"

"Yes, I suppose I shall," she agreed. "But it's *you* I'm thinking of. It doesn't seem to me to matter

much whom I marry, and of course when it's a question of saving such a frightful lot of talk and bother I'd far, *far* rather marry you than not, if you are willing. But what about you? May you not grow to be sorry? How dreadful it would be if you grew to be very, very sorry when it was too late! That's what I'm thinking of most of all."

"You child!" said Edward Harding. Then he added gently, "I don't think I shall grow to be sorry."

The light faded and grew dim as dusk came sweeping over the shabby old schoolroom; the fire burnt low, leaving only a faint red glow in place of the leaping blaze; the school books and the old cracked Collard and Collard, and the deal table, and dilapidated chairs gradually lost their outlines and turned into vague, pale spirit-like things, formless and shadowy as moths. Ariadne's old well-washed white cashmere, defining her slender waist with a clinging fondness that only our oldest garments ever know how to manifest, lost its extreme yellowness and became as delicately white as in the days of its pristine youth.

But what those two were saying to each other in there was best said in a hushed dim light like this, and in lowered voices.

And then at last they rose, and presently they went together to find Alexander St. John.

CHAPTER III

THE MAGIC JOURNEY

SUCH a sunrise !

It seemed as if all the spirits of the beautiful were in league that morning to show how exquisite and tender Dawn could be as she broke over the rambling happy-go-lucky old garden of Exton Manor, peeped in rosily through the lattice windows of many a boy's and girl's bedroom, lit strange lights on the cold mauve of the young lilacs, smiled at herself redly in the duck-pond, and changed the whole quiet countryside, that was so green and placid and English, into a sweet revel of warmth and colour and excitement, just by piling scarlet mountains in the sky against low green hillocks on the earth, just by turning the sleepy river to a vivid stream of crimson and orange, just by firing red and purple lights on the backs of the homely cocks and hens, in the eyes of the drowsy cattle, even in the utterly ugly and commonplace milkcans that the farmers were sending forth thus early in the morning. It was a sunrise that seemed to cry aloud of the glory and beauty of life.

Ariadne watched it from the window, leaning far out and letting her wealth of red-gold hair catch fire from the glittering beams in the eastern sky as she had done a hundred times before ; and as she watched, she smiled.

"While the sun is there one needn't be afraid of anything," she said to herself aloud. And then she added proudly, "And even if there is no sun one needn't be afraid. . . . For always dawn comes again. No, I'm not frightened. . . . I scorn to be frightened. . . ." And she crept back to bed and fell into the deep sweet slumber that the night had denied her.

The wedding was at two, quite a quiet wedding. The Vicar who had christened them all, and the curate who had grown up amongst them, were the officiates, and there were only half a dozen guests in all. Alice was the only bridesmaid, and she trembled all through the ceremony, handing the bride her ring with shaking fingers that were quite in keeping with the girl who was losing her younger sister from the home for ever.

Then came the wedding breakfast, a family affair in the big oak-lined dining-hall under a great white bell of flowers that had been fashioned by the loving fingers of many young brothers and sisters.

Dad made a little speech, a charming old-world speech. . . . He had lost his daughter . . . but he had found a son. . . . His dear wife, could she have been here to-day, would have echoed his feelings of happiness and content at giving Ariadne to a man like Edward." His voice grew husky, and broke, for Alexander St. John was nothing if not emotional, and with all his faults he loved his children passionately, and this hasty shifting from Alice to Ariadne had been an extraordinary affair, and exceedingly upsetting. But still, he and he alone knew in full what this marriage meant to the family coffers—if debts and writs could be dignified by so grandiloquent a name.

They drank to the health of the bride, and Fat Girl burst into a loud wail, Alice buried her face in her hands, and Sandy and Jocelyn and Curt-Bird stuffed their mouths with cake and helped themselves to wine so hastily and freely that they scarcely knew whether they were standing on their heads or their heels for quite a long time afterwards.

Then Ariadne rose slowly to her feet, not knowing in the least whether it was the right thing to do, but possessed by some strange spirit that was half excitement and half pluck, and lifting her untouched glass, said quickly, "I thank you all. I promise you I'll be happy. . . ." then put the glass down without a drop having passed her lips.

They were off on their journey then, the bride and bridegroom.

They crossed in the evening and soon were flying through France and Switzerland, and then along that beautiful route that embraces Lucerne, the Italian Lakes, Milan, and drops downwards into real Italy. The weather was cold. Snow lay on the mountains, gleaming white outside their windows as they went flying onwards. All the world now seemed to have disappeared and a strange sensation came creeping over Ariadne as she sat there at Edward's side, snatched away in a moment as it were from everything and every one but him. Hour after hour, and still it was just they two alone together; they breakfasted at a little table in the train after leaving Bâle; they lunched at Milan; there they had an hour to wait and in that time they drove to see the great cathedral.

Over the flagged streets their ramshackle carriage went dashing with the recklessness that characterizes

the Italian driver, and a feeling of exhilaration began to mount into Ariadne's brain.

Never, if she lived to be a hundred, would she forget that first coming into the wonderful Duomo, the lifting of the great curtain of the door, the sudden hush that seemed to fall like a benediction ; the dim gold light ; the stealing perfumes of the incense ; the chanting choirs ; the vast space and height opening out before them ; the great stained windows through which the dim religious light did little more than make the darkness visible.

Involuntarily, overcome with that feeling of longing for a human touch that rises in us all in the presence of sublime beauty, she stretched her hand out and touched Edward.

He started, and looked down at her, and met the great eyes full of tears.

"What is it? Are you ill?"

"No, no!"

She tried to smile.

"I'm so happy," she said incoherently. "It's so wonderful, so beautiful."

She could not help herself, she clung to his arm as she had never done before ; all barriers seemed in that moment to have gone down between them, just as if they were the only people in the world. They were close, so close ; all the horrid cares and vexations that had been surrounding them had vanished as if blown away by a spirit's magic breath ; the great cathedral with its illusion of infinite height and space, and its music, and its stately columns, and its incense, had become like the garden of paradise in which they two were the only Adam and Eve. And all in a moment

Edward got the first glimpse of the flower that had begun springing up in his heart. A veil fell from his eyes. And so swift and sudden was the revelation that he was almost blinded before it. Perhaps the girl at his side felt something of what was passing in his mind, for quietly she drew her hand away from his arm and moved softly forward, feeling the need to be alone for one brief moment at any rate. She sank on her knees, and all her heart went out in a voiceless prayer that seemed to be caught up into the cathedral's great silent spaces, through which the music was sweeping now in an ecstasy, up, up, to the infinite heights above.

Then they went out again into the daylight ; they walked round the outside of the beautiful building, drinking in every detail of the white marble glory of it, and then back into their carriage they got, and away towards the station, their hearts full of a new and exquisite sense of peace.

That night they came creeping down over the mountains into the lovely Val d'Arno, and the peace that had suddenly sprung up between them in the Duomo lingered still.

They got out at a little wayside platform for some coffee early in the morning, before the dawn had quite come. The air of Italy was so light and crisp that Ariadne could scarcely keep from laughing aloud just from sheer joyfulness, but as she was getting back into the train the door slammed suddenly on her fingers and she uttered a low cry of pain. Edward was at her side in a moment. He opened the door, his face turning very white when he realized what had happened.

Her little finger and the middle fingers were bruised, and it seemed to the girl that the pain from that slight accident was the most acute she had ever suffered.

She sank into her seat in the carriage, and gave her hand over to Edward's keeping, closing her eyes as he bandaged it in a clean handkerchief ; then he made her a sling of his muffler and insisted upon her wearing it.

By and by, tired and worn with pain, she fell asleep, and in her sleep it seemed to her that she was living not in real life at all but in a beautiful dream, for Edward had put his arm round her ; he had taken off her hat and pillowed her head against his shoulder, holding her with inexpressible tenderness.

What lay before him he knew not, but the magic that had seized Ariadne in so wonderful and mysterious a way had stolen over him too.

Nothing was clear but the fact that Ariadne was here, seated at his side, leaning against him, encircled by his arm, and sleeping on his shoulder like a tired child.

Dawn broke, and the scenery grew strangely beautiful as they crept down, down, down, into that loveliest of all valleys with the Arno winding through it like a thread of silver, and beautiful Florence smiling in the sweet soft light of early morn.

Ariadne slept on, and it was not until they had actually come to a standstill at the station and the wild babel of voices from the loud-voiced *cocchieri* and *facchini* filled the air with a tumult of noise that she awoke and found her head on Edward's shoulder, and felt his left arm round her waist.

She blushed as she realized where she was.

Softly she drew herself away and put her hand up

to her ruffled hair, with a shy movement that was instinct with grace and prettiness.

"You're better for the sleep," said Edward.

"Yes. . . . I didn't know I was going to sleep," naïvely. "I must have fallen off without knowing it."

Outside went on the wild yells and shrieks of the porters while people rushed about frantically in all directions, as they always do at Italian railway stations. But inside two people seemed to have lost all recognition of where they were. Edward sat perfectly still. He might have been just starting out on his journey instead of having arrived.

"You were not unhappy, were you?" he asked her gently.

"Oh no!"

That overwhelming shyness seized her again; she felt the air vibrating; it seemed to be alive with all sorts of wonderful golden things that were in reality her own thoughts and Edward's.

"And I—I was happy too. For an hour I watched over you . . . you were like a child . . . you seemed so helpless, so confiding . . . you leaned against me."

A loud voice broke in on them and the door was flung open unceremoniously, ending Edward's speech abruptly.

"Luggage! Luggage!" shouted a black-browed *facchino*, dressed in the loose blue linen blouse and trousers of his kind.

Ariadne sprang to her feet and put her hat on, glad to turn her back for a moment to Edward.

There was no more talk between them. They left the train and after securing their luggage and passing

it through the *dogana*, they stepped into a carriage and drove away through the sunny streets of Florence towards the *Hotel de la Ville*, that stands on the banks of the Arno.

"You would like some coffee, wouldn't you?" said Edward as they drew up at the door of the hotel.

"Yes, but let us have it here in this beautiful hall," said Ariadne, looking round her with admiration.

People were sitting about at little tables, and the girl sank into a big chair that stood invitingly quite near. She was tired. And yet never in her life had she escaped so wonderfully from the material things that seemed to make up the burden of life. Those words of Edward's. . . . They were in her ears, in her heart. What would he have said, she wondered, if the *facchino* had not interrupted them just then? Was it possible that he really liked her.

Was it possible that he even cared for her, that he was fond of her? Not even to herself could Ariadne say that he loved her. She could not put it like that, she dared not. But she just sat there dazed with her thoughts, watching Edward go across to the office and give his orders.

A man came quickly with delicious coffee and rolls, and a flower-seller entered just then with a wonderful basket of carnations, of such size and fragrance that Ariadne uttered a cry of delight, and wanted to buy them all, especially when she learnt how ridiculously cheap they were.

She pressed them to her with her free arm and looked shyly over the top of them at Edward, who was carefully pouring out her coffee and buttering her roll for her.

"Aren't they too lovely?" she exclaimed girlishly.

He looked at her and grew suddenly speechless before the sight of her, so fair and youthful, sitting there in her grey fur toque and long grey chinchilla coat, that set off her fairness bewitchingly, with the pink carnations held in her arms seeming to belong to the flower-like face above them, and his heart was full of secret wonder and gratitude at the way in which Providence had intervened and given him Ariadne instead of Alice.

Afterwards they drove through the glittering morning to the Piazza Michelangiolo, partly to see the Buonarrotti's statue of David and partly to drink in the view of Florence.

Three American ladies who were carefully examining the statue, were talking in such loud voices that Ariadne and Edward became amused listeners in spite of themselves.

First lady : "I guess this is David."

Second lady : "I've just been crazy to see him."

Third lady : "This certainly is David!"

First lady : "My!"

Second lady : "Wal!"

Third lady : "Just to think of that!"

First lady : "Say, there's something mighty queer about it."

Second lady : "See here! How does he get that throw?"

Third lady : "Imagine it's all right. It's by Michel Angiolo. Listen here" (*reading Baedeker*). "In the piazzale (café restaurant) rises a bronze copy of Michel Angiolo's David, the pedestal of which is surrounded by The Four Periods of the Day (see page

500) . . . charming view. To the north-east——”

First lady (interrupting) : “Guess it’s his head. It’s too big.”

Second lady : “No, it’s his feet.”

Third lady (looking positive) : “It’s his hands.”

They walked round David slowly, their veils blowing out on the breeze, while David looked white, but otherwise was quite composed.

First lady : “See here—I tell you, it’s his *throw* ! He’s got the wrong leg forward. See here ! (*Picking up a pebble.*) I’m about to throw. I put my leg so, my shoulder so !”

Second lady (stooping for a pebble) : “Like this !”

Third lady : “Like this.” (*Stooping for a pebble, but falling over.*)

First lady : “That’s how I throw !” (*Throws her pebble.*)

Second lady : “That’s how *I* throw !”

Third lady (panting) : “That’s how I throw !” (*Throwing an imaginary pebble also.*)

Edward and Ariadne were highly amused as they watched these three figures, a long lean lady, a shortish leanish lady, a lady quite short and quite stout, all bending in front of David.

Ariadne snapped them hastily.

First lady : “You see ? The wrong leg.”

Second lady : “I told you so.”

Third lady : “I told you it was wrong the minute I saw it.”

They ceased pebble throwing and came back to unclassical postures.

First lady (very positively) : “Besides, his head is too big.”

Second lady (equally positively) : "Seems to me it's his feet."

Third lady (still breathless) : "His hands."

First lady (summing up) : "Something about it makes me feel sort of—sort of——"

Second lady : "I know."

Third lady : "Glad it's over. Mrs. John J. Johnstone tells me *Florence is a very nice little residential city.*"

Laughing heartily, Edward and Ariadne strolled up the inimitable hill above, and it seemed to both of them that they were drawn closer than before by that ridiculous little scene which they had witnessed and laughed at together.

Shopping in Florence proved even more amusing.

Ariadne was buying a veil in a fascinating shop off the Piazza Victor Emmanuele, when a carriage drove up and out there stepped a tiny, plump, black-haired Signora.

"*Buongiorno,*" she said affably.

"*Felice giorno, Signora. Cosa commanda ?*" said the shopman.

"I want a morning hat. Show me one of those please."

"*Si Signora. Eccolo !*"

"Pretty. It suits me too." She tried it on.

"What will you charge me for that ?"

"Will you give me seventy-five francs ?"

"*Cosa ! Che !* Certainly not ! I'll give you forty."

"*Impossibile !* Madam, I also have teeth to eat with."

"*Va ! Pace !*"

She threw out her hands and flung out of the shop. The shopman made a sudden rush after her.

" *Venga, venga, Signora !* "

The Signora halted.

" Will you give me fifty-five francs ? Say, to begin with ? "

The Signora came slowly back.

" No ! The last price I shall offer," she said, coming in further, " is forty-five francs."

He waved his hands like fans to indicate his despair and disgust.

" Very well, then," said the Signora, turning away again.

" Signora, you evidently don't want to do any business with me," said the shopman, moving after her.

" You astonish me, asking such a price *the first time !* "

They looked firmly at each other.

Then :

" There, take it ! You'll come and buy from me again, Signora ? "

Ariadne caught a glimpse of two wide white expanses of teeth.

" *Certamente !* "

The Signora left with the hat and got into her carriage, murmuring, " Too dear altogether ! Never do I go there again ! "

Then there entered two English ladies to the same shop and the same hats.

" Have you any hats ? White. White ! " (louder)
" *Bianco !* "

" *Si, Signorina !* "

" *Quanto costare questo ?* How much ? "

" This ? "

He looked at the hat hard. Then at the ground. Again at the hat, hard.

"This! This is ninety francs."

"How much?"

"*Novanta*. Ninety lira."

"He says ninety lira, mother."

"Isn't that rather dear?"

"Signora, *no*! The first time any one has ever called *my* things dear. *Very* cheap!"

"What do you think, mother?"

"Well, I think it would be cheaper at Whiteley's."

"Shall I offer him a little less?"

"You might try."

"*Prendere voi dieci meno? Dieci! Meno! For eighty lira!*"

"Come, Signora!" he exclaimed aghast. "Ten lira less! *Impossibile!* That is the *fixed price*."

He fell into an expression of deep, dark sorrow, mingled with surprise. Then he turned and sold a penn'orth of ribbon to a little milliner, serving her with much zeal.

He ignored the others utterly.

"What do you think, mother?"

"I think it might be cheaper at Whiteley's."

"Not the same quality though. This is Florence, you know."

"Yes, of course."

They stood, hesitating.

The shopman suddenly turned to them.

He made a magnificent gesture indicative of unparalleled generosity.

"Signora, I will make you a difference of *two francs*!"

He rushed to pick up the hat.

"What does he say?"

"He'll let us have it for eighty-eight lira."

"Oh, *that's* cheaper!"

It is to be doubted, however, if Edward Harding heard much of that, so engrossed was he in watching the lift of Ariadne's eyelashes and the gleam of her adorable little white teeth.

CHAPTER IV

THEIR HOME-COMING

THEIR strange honeymoon was over.

After Italy, they had done Paris from end to end, seen pictures, statues, plays, eaten at an infinite variety of restaurants and cafés, made many excursions into the charming country around the gay "City of Light," and now they were back in England, on their way to Harding Hall. It was near dusk, and the whole countryside seemed to know of their coming. Never was a warmer welcome poured forth on a bride and bridegroom, and Ariadne divined now, not without a slight feeling of surprise, that Edward Harding was a tremendously popular squire. A great "Welcome," worked in flowers, was run up across the country road. The villagers were gathered at the station in crowds; they took the horses from the carriage, and with much good-humoured laughter and jostling, insisted on drawing the Squire and his bride home to the Hall.

"I hope this doesn't annoy you," said Edward politely, in a low voice.

"Not at all, why should it?"

Ariadne felt a little offended at his question; as a matter of fact, she was revelling like a child in the excitement of the home-coming, and Edward's words seemed almost as if intended to damp any natural

pride she might have felt in the crowd's gaiety and goodwill.

"I thought you might find it rather a bore, that's all—rather a farce, I mean."

"The thing, then, is to laugh our parts through," she answered, but so sweetly and humorously that Edward found himself admiring the deftness of her reply.

She refused to be damped. The evening was so lovely, so inexpressibly tender, with the soft lights fading off the meadows, and the great elms growing black against the bronze sky, and the rooks cawing, and the scent of all the dear homely English garden flowers stealing purely into the twilight. Far away in the distance exquisite little vistas showed themselves to the girl's beauty-loving eyes. This was Gloucestershire, and that long line of silver with the red light in it was the Severn. Those low blurred hills in the background were the Cotswolds. And the atmosphere was so bracing and delicious that it made one feel glad to be alive again, after the heat of stuffy Paris.

"You never told me how beautiful this country is," she exclaimed suddenly. "Why, it's like a dream in this light; it's almost too dear to be real!"

"I'm glad you like it. I'm very fond of the old place myself. Ah, here we are, at our gates, and this is the famous cypress avenue. There isn't another like it in England."

Down the cypress avenue, through the long black sentinel-like trees they went, and at last the lights of the Hall gleamed before them through the dusk.

She held her head high as she passed over the thresh-

hold with Edward, and in a few minutes she was being conducted by the housekeeper to her own rooms. There her feeling of elation returned a thousandfold. Everything was so fairy-like that she went about uttering low cries of rapture.

Through the great windows what a view there was !

She faced westwards, and the red of the sunset was still in the sky.

Infinitely pathetic and beautiful looked that landscape as it lay stretched out there beneath her eyes, and suddenly those eyes filled with tears. Never before this moment had the girl realized to the full what her marriage with Edward Harding would bring her. She had indulged in no visions whatever. On the contrary she had driven out all dreams, afraid that they might be terrifying ones. And now she was face to face with reality, and everything seemed to her too fair for words. But a vast sense of her own unworthiness swept over her, filling her girlish heart with poignant distress.

It seemed to her most desperately unfair that she should come into an inheritance like this. She had done nothing to deserve it—nothing. She had neither loved Edward when she married him, nor had he loved her. And yet, this beautiful home of his was hers also, at her disposal. The servants were all hers to do her bidding. Gardens, lawns, stables—she was mistress over all. It was incredible.

She drew a deep breath, overcome with a sense of almost overwhelming responsibility. But soon the future seemed to dance before her in a strange glamour ; all opalescent and rose it gleamed sweetly, alluringly,

and in spite of her fears and forebodings her lips curved in a smile.

When she came down to dinner that night she wore a white satin frock that threw up the dazzling fairness of her neck and arms. She sat at the end of the table in the great dining-hall, and talked and laughed brightly, and once or twice she felt Edward's eyes on her curiously. In a great mirror at the far end of the room she saw her face. Was it only vanity? Or was she looking strangely pretty? Were her great eyes dark and shining like that girl's in the mirror? And that pink flush in the girl's cheeks—was it in hers too? She tried to drive away these thoughts, but in spite of herself she could not help hoping that Edward was admiring her a little.

After dinner she threw a light wrap round her shoulders, and wandered out into the great flower-filled gardens. Not far off a nightingale was singing. How sweet it sounded! And the breath of the flowers—how inexpressibly tender and dear! Vague thoughts went whirling up in her mind, thoughts about the beauty of life and then about Edward's goodness to her. She heard a sound and started. She had left Edward smoking a cigar on the verandah. Was it possible he had followed her down here?

"Is that you?" she said in a low voice.

She was chary still of using Edward's name.

She blushed a little when she received no answer. How foolish of her to suppose he would come down into the garden just because she was there! She walked quickly round the shrubbery, and then, pausing by a great rose-bush, buried her head against their creamy, velvet petals, and wondered what

Edward was thinking of her. Was all this mask of politeness simply his determination not to let the world know there was anything queer about their marriage? Or did he, perhaps, like her just a little? That was what she was always asking herself now.

She roamed about for some time, and then went back to the great lamplit house, thinking to try the delightful grand piano that seemed to be crying out for some one to play it. Slowly she went up the steps, the bunch of yellow roses she had gathered in her arms, and a strange feeling of light-heartedness and happiness pervading her whole being. Her lips parted, and she sang softly under her breath, "*Un peu de vie.*"

As she reached the French windows she saw Edward coming into the drawing-room by another door, and she noticed that he held a letter in one hand, and a packet in the other.

"I've just heard from Alice," he said in a quick direct way, coming over towards her. "It's a nice letter. Very nice indeed. It was really very good of her to write to me. She sends back some rings and gewgaws and things that I gave her." He paused and looked at Ariadne for a moment. The idea of offering them to her flashed through his mind just for one brief instant, and then he realized that it was impossible. He would not care to do that. He was sure that she would not care about it, either. He would wait and give her other jewels. The Harding pearls would be for her. His mother had delayed sending them, and so they had never been presented to Alice. Well, Ariadne should have them now.

He read aloud—"I do hope you'll forgive me for the terrible wrong I've done you."

He paused and looked up at Ariadne.

"That strikes me as rather strong," he said, smiling "I don't feel that Alice has done me any wrong. I can't see it that way at all!"

Ariadne listened to him, pale and silent, wondering what he was going to say next.

"As a matter of fact," he went on, with the air of a man who has something to say and must say it, no matter how unpleasant it may be, "As a matter of fact, I am not in the least unhappy. Not in the least. But you? How about you? After all you were the one who did the brave deed. I see it now in that light. You sacrificed yourself, wholeheartedly, without a thought—on the altar of your family's welfare."

"Oh I—but I'm quite—really quite happy," faltered Ariadne. "As long as you are, I am."

And Edward took up her words and repeated them with a half-jesting laugh that was yet half serious as well.

"Well, as long as you are, *I* am," he said, "and that's the truth of it!"

CHAPTER V

THE FASCINATIONS OF A WOMAN'S WORK-BASKET

OUTSIDE the rain beat down mercilessly, dismally, just as it had done for the last three days ceaselessly, in wilful and wanton disregard of the fact that it was midsummer. So cold was the atmosphere up here in the Cotswolds that a red fire burnt cosily in the pretty chintz-hung boudoir where Ariadne had ensconced herself since lunch with her work-basket, and a heap of new books, and—in a whisper be it said—a packet of chocolates, which her nineteen years still held dear.

Ariadne's boudoir was the delight of her heart, and every day she fell more and more in love with it ; but the strangeness of the beautiful, fairy-like nest being all hers—her very own—increased instead of diminished as time wore on. She, to have a boudoir ! It seemed as unreal and as utterly incomprehensible as that wedding-ring on her little white hand. And just as the boudoir began to trouble her more and more as time went on, with a sense of her having done nothing whatever to deserve it, so did the wedding ring, and the longing to be worthy of being Edward's wife was opening her heart and sympathies in a hundred ways. Her face took on a wistful, touching expression as she sat staring into the glowing fire, her work on her knee.

She was thinking of Edward. She was telling herself that till she knew him she had never realized that a man could be so delicate, thoughtful, considerate.

For she had been quietly saved from comments. She had gone with him to his lawyers, and her deed of settlement had been signed, and all had been done with an incredible kindness and chivalry that somehow shamed her acutely, so little did she do in return.

"Ariadne!" said a voice. "Oh, there you are! I couldn't see you for that great armchair you've got into. Are you busy? May I come in?"

Edward appeared at the door.

"No, I'm only sewing. Do you want me to do anything?" eagerly.

"I want you to look at these, and tell me if you like them."

"These" proved to be a rather important-looking leather case, which Edward laid in Ariadne's lap.

She opened the case quickly, and there before her eyes lay wonderful white masses of pearls. She gazed at them in amazement. Then her grey eyes swept upwards to Edward, who stood by watching her.

"Well, do you like them?" he asked, a faintly amused expression about his bronzed face. "They're pearls that have been in the family ever since my poor old grandfather struck oil in California, some hundred odd years ago, and made the fortunes of the Harding family. They're rather fine I believe."

He did not add that Lady Harding had clung to the pearls in a most discomfiting way all this time, and that he had not been quite sure whether she intended ever to relinquish them.

"Oh, I can't wear them," cried Ariadne. "They're far too beautiful for me!"

"They're yours."

"But I—I don't want any jewels"—piteously. "I never had any. I can quite well do without. Oh, please don't be offended, but I'd much—*much* rather not have them."

"They are yours," quietly. "I am afraid you must keep them. But of course you need not wear them if you dislike the idea so much."

"Oh, no, no, it isn't that!" Ariadne reddened, and her lips trembled childishly. Her voice faltered as she added, "They are too good for me."

She wanted to tell him how she longed to do something for him in return for all he had given her.

But the words stuck in her throat, and she became dumb, stupid, confused.

"You have the only right to them," he answered, quietly still. "They were left to me in my father's will—for"—he hesitated ever so slightly—"for the woman I married."

He changed the subject, embarrassed by Ariadne's distress.

He had expected her face to light up with joy at the sight of the pearls, for, like most men, he was a believer in the old adage that all women are susceptible to jewels.

But behind it all he was conscious that he was not exactly displeased.

Puzzled, yes; but not annoyed.

In fact, he was even definitely glad to find that for reasons of her own, she could rise superior to jewels

like these—she who had dared so greatly as to marry an almost unknown man wholly and solely for the sake of helping her family.

“What are you making?” he asked a little awkwardly.

“A tie. It’s for Sandy.” She held it up for him to look at, and then it struck her that he was standing up all this time, and perhaps was waiting for an invitation to sit down. He was always punctilious about interrupting her solitude in the boudoir.

“Won’t you sit down?” she said timidly. “You can have this big chair, if you like. It’s the most mannish one in the room.”

She rose nervously as she spoke. Edward stepped forward to prevent her from doing so. They came into collision. Each drew back sharply, and in the confusion of the moment Ariadne’s work-basket fell off her lap, and all its contents were scattered on the floor.

Is there anything so cunningly annoying as the way in which a work-basket behaves when upset?

All the reels of cotton seem to fly like lightning under every sofa or chair available.

All the hooks and eyes fall out of their packets and lose themselves in some woolly rug or mat.

The silk gets tangled with the darning needles and scissors, and presents a most hopeless appearance when finally extricated from a distant corner, where a cobweb must have been growing, to judge from the condition of the rescued articles.

Innumerable tiny buttons spread themselves like happy daisies over the carpet, generally choosing some white spot to rest on, so that they are more likely to escape detection.

Ariadne's work-basket was no exception, and it took Edward quite ten minutes to gather in the last defiant pin.

"I'm so frightfully sorry," he said, emerging with a rather red face from under the great chintz-covered sofa in the corner, with his hands full of all manner of tiny buttons and pins and hooks. "It was all my fault."

The ice was broken now, and for the instant there was no question of Edward going away. He seated himself in front of Ariadne, handing her back her things, and watching with interested eyes as she put them tidily in the recalcitrant work-basket.

"What a queer lot of things you have," said he. "That, for instance—what on earth is that?"

"It's a bodkin. Do you mean to say you don't know a bodkin when you see one?"

"I'm afraid I'm very ignorant," humbly. "In fact, I don't know yet what a bodkin is for. What do you do with it?"

"Oh, you use it like this," said Ariadne, taken up with the novelty of showing a grown-up being how to use the article in question. "You put a piece of tape through that big eye."

"Eye! I should call it a slit. It looks big enough to post a letter in."

"How absurd!" But she found herself smiling, and Edward smiled too.

Outside, the grey, cold rain beat down drearily, and the poor sopping fields and meadows looked dim and forlorn under the pale, watery sky.

The roses in the rose-parterre were bending dolorously, their wet faces turned sadly earthwards.

In the little wood near the house a white mist floated, creeping like a phantom through the dark masses of rain-wet trees and undergrowth.

Out there all was sombre, melancholy, sunless.

But here, in this warm cosy room, with the chintz hangings and the gleaming silver, and masses of exquisite flowers shedding their fragrance through the air, one seemed to be in a different world altogether, and perhaps that was why time was flying by with such fleet, soft footsteps.

"These are rum needles, surely," said Edward.
"They look drunk."

"No, they've only lost their heads," said Ariadne.

She had to laugh now, all her little white teeth showing, as she threw back her head and gave way to gay, childish merriment at Edward's ridiculous comment and her own reply.

"Why have they lost their heads?" persisted Edward seriously. "What's wrong with the poor things? And there's a whole family of them. Was there a massacre or what was it?"

"They are self-threading needles," said Ariadne reprovingly. "They're not meant to have heads."

"And this — what on earth's this piece of wood?"

"Why, it's a reel of cotton, only I've used all the cotton but I haven't thrown away the reel. Fancy you not knowing that it was a reel."

"I think you're awfully clever," said Edward.
"Women really know a great deal more than they're supposed to. A man would take a lifetime to learn the different names of all these weird things and what to do with them, and here are you, thoroughly well

up in the subject. I think it's jolly clever of you, really I do."

He was so sincere that Ariadne would not have laughed for the world.

"It never struck me before that a woman was clever because she knew things like that, but maybe there's something in it. Perhaps we women are a little too much given to thinking ourselves ignorant creatures." She looked archly at him.

"And I suppose you can tell me what this is?" he said, drawing from the work-basket an extraordinary little affair, a wheel that was ever so tiny, with a still tinier handle of ivory. "This is a toy, isn't it?" He returned her mischievous glance with a teasing one. "A toy for a little girl."

"Not a bit of it," said Ariadne. "It's a frightfully useful thing. I couldn't live without it. It's a pattern-wheel. See, it traces patterns and designs when you want to embroider."

"Extraordinary! Now show me how you work those needles that don't want threading."

Her slim fingers picked one out daintily, and holding it up before him she showed him how the cotton slipped down through the opening at the top, instead of being threaded through an eye.

He was properly impressed, and made several ventures himself, afterwards, with more or less success.

"Those are the needles I've been looking for all my life," he said, "and nobody ever told me about them. I shall be able to darn my own socks now."

Ariadne started, and grew grave. Seriously her great eyes looked up into his face; questioningly, softly, she regarded him.

"Couldn't *I* do them for you?" she said, a blush rising in her cheek. "I should so like to . . . I was only thinking this morning how I wish I could do something for you, considering all you do for me . . . I live here in this beautiful house . . . I've servants to wait on me hand and foot . . . I've all the books in the world and all the music, and all the flowers. . . . It seems almost uncanny. . . . Every morning I feel as if some one would come and say to me: 'It's time you were off now, you've been here long enough.' That alone shows how perfectly delightful it is to be here,—and yet I do nothing at all for you. I—I'd give anything if you'd let me do something real, something *homely*, like I used to do for dad and the boys, when I was at home . . ."

She paused.

Edward said nothing.

"As a matter of fact," she went on hurriedly, "I'm a much better darning and mending than Alice. They always said so at home."

"It's very, very good of you. But why on earth should you want to do things like that? Your fingers were made for prettier things—embroideries, playing the harp and the piano, picking flowers."

She sank back into her chair, and picking up Sandy's tie, began to knit.

Her eyelashes made curtains for those shining eyes of hers, but she got up presently and seated herself at the great Broadwood and began to play.

It was Schumann's Carnival that she was playing. Scene after scene of those exquisite, alluring little musical dramas stole from the piano, seeming to paint themselves on the fragrant flower-filled atmosphere of

the room. Edward lay back in a big chair by the fire. He had a book in his hand, an explorer's exciting description of adventures near the South Pole, but not a word of it did he read. He sat stealthily drinking in the picture at the piano.

And she had offered to darn his socks—had wanted to—this girl-vision, who was loveliness incarnate.

Ah, but she thought of him as Sandy or Jocelyn or Curt-Bird! That was why she had offered! He knew that well. He stretched his hand out suddenly, shut his book, and going over to the piano stood looking down at her.

"I'm glad you've made friends with the O'Dowells," he said when she stopped playing. "You won't be so lonely as you might otherwise have been away from all those brothers and sisters of yours. Sir James is a charming old man—if a bit of a dreamer—and Kit is quite a character. Somehow I had an idea that you and she would get on."

"I like her frightfully," said Ariadne. "She's so original and outspoken. I'm very glad indeed they're neighbours of ours, because they seem so different from the ordinary people in the country. Are they *very* poor, Edward?"

"Yes. They came over from Australia a few years ago to take up the empty baronetcy. I think myself it was rather a mistake, but they're such a happy-go-lucky lot they don't mind anything much as long as they can get books and music."

"Well, books and music go a long way towards making life happy," and her glance, slipping round the room, seemed to tenderly embrace her piano and the friendly revolving bookshelves, with their treasures

of poetry, and philosophy, and romance, and then, coming to an end of her journey at Edward's face, her gaze rested there softly, as if to bring him into the circuit of the things that made for happiness.

CHAPTER VI

"NOTHING BUT A CHILD!"

"**I** WANT you to let me teach you how to handle a revolver," said Edward presently. "I'll take great care of you and see that nothing happens. In these days of burglaries and scares, it's really *necessary* for every woman to know how to protect herself, and I heard you telling Sandy one afternoon that you were afraid of the mere sight of firearms."

Ariadne shrank back.

"Oh, please don't ask me," she said piteously. "I'm such a coward. I could never learn to fire."

"But won't you try?" said Edward.

He was very much in earnest, and every moment the matter seemed to him to become more and more vital and important. "Come with me to the gun-room . . . you said you wanted to do something for me. There you are! There's something you can do. Let me teach you how to handle a revolver."

"It's tea-time now," said Ariadne.

"Well, after tea, then," said Edward. "*Please!*"

They had tea together and Edward was so impatient about it that by half-past five he was carrying Ariadne off in triumph to the gun-room, away across the hall. On the way he stopped, and picked up a coat of his, insisting on her putting it around her, as there was no

fire in the gun-room and she would find it cold there after the boudoir.

"Then I shall put it on," said Ariadne, mischievously.

She slipped her long arms through the sleeves of the light grey overcoat, and buttoned it round her slight young form. "I make a splendid boy," she said laughing.

"Wait till I've taught you to shoot," said Edward, "then we can talk about that."

In the gun-room how different it was from the boudoir! Everything was dark and sombre. The vast tessellated floor stretched in its cold bareness to the plain slate-coloured walls, and the huge windows were void of curtains, and let the dreary landscape in on three sides. The walls were covered with all manner of curious things. It was Ariadne's turn now to stare about her in surprise.

"What on earth is that?" she cried, starting back from a huge animal, which was standing at the far end of the room looking in the dim light quite like life.

"It's only a stuffed rhinoceros," said Edward. "I shot it myself. I'm rather proud of it too, for it's no joke getting a rhinoceros home, I can tell you!"

"Oh, horrible!" shuddered Ariadne. "And fancy you shooting it all yourself! How splendid of you! Whatever's this big soft thing on the floor?"

"An elephant's paw, made into a cushion," said Edward.

He laughed.

"You can have it in your boudoir if you like it. That same elephant came very near finishing me three years ago."

Ariadne shivered.

"How awful! And you shot it too!" she said, the admiration deepening in her voice. "Can you shoot an elephant with one shot? I should have thought it would have taken a blast of gunpowder to kill one. You must be *awfully* strong!"

She interrupted herself to give a little shriek.

"Oh, *skulls*!" she cried. "How dreadful! One, two, three real men's skulls. However did you get them? Did you dig them up out of a graveyard?"

Edward looked grim for a moment, and then burst into irrepressible laughter. He found the query singularly bewitching. He thought it was the most absolutely feminine one he had ever heard on a woman's lips, but he hurried away from the subject, not wishing to go into details about that short sharp encounter with the tribe of Massi, of which those three black men's skulls were a souvenir.

"What's this dirty piece of stuff?" said Ariadne, looking at a lump which stood alone under a glass case on a small table.

"I'll have that made into ear-rings for you, if you like," said Edward in a superior way. "That's the first piece of gold from the Yukon that found its way to Europe."

"Men are awfully clever," sighed Ariadne. "I know it's frightfully stupid and ignorant of me, but I can't even always tell gold from silver when they're dirty."

"Now you must have your lesson," said Edward, who was secretly delighted with her naïve admiration. "Come over here by the window," he said. "Now look here! You see this? This is just an ordinary

nice pretty little revolver. I take it in my hand like this, do you see? It isn't loaded."

At this point Ariadne cried that she was frightened and begged him to put it down.

"Oh, but come now!" Edward looked dismayed. "You really ought to learn, you know."

He laid his hand on her arm, and tried to show her how simple and harmless it was really, if one only understood how to manage it. "Just watch me," he said, imploringly. "Nothing can possibly happen to you. Can't you believe me?"

She allowed him to place the pistol in her hand. He bent near her. To his dismay, she trembled so that she could scarcely hold the dreadful little gleaming thing in her fingers.

"Why, Ariadne!" He laid the revolver down quickly, and turned towards her. She drooped against him, and with a little shiver hid her face on his coat-sleeve. For one brief second she stayed there, unconscious how the face bent over her changed colour.

Edward's hand came on her hair.

"Ariadne, Ariadne!" he whispered humbly. "Forgive me. I'm frightfully sorry. I didn't realize it was as bad as all that. What a monster I must seem, little girl."

She drew herself away and murmured some incoherent words about her idiotic nervousness and how ashamed she was. Edward hurried her back to the warm fireside as quickly as he could, and was so evidently contrite at having teased her that she felt quite touched, and began to make secret vows to herself that some time—not just yet—but some time a little later on, she really would master her absurd

cowardice and let him teach her to shoot. And all the while Edward was pondering on the incomprehensibility of women. Here was this young and lovely child perfectly willing to marry a man she had not spoken more than a dozen words to, yet terrified before an unloaded revolver. He began to realize then to what an extent Ariadne was indeed nothing but a clever child.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH KIT O'DOWELL IS BRUTAL

ARIADNE sat upstairs in the little boudoir that looked out across the lilacs, writing, or trying to write.

There were piles of foolscap on the table before her, and ink and many broad-nibbed pens, but the paper was most of it blank. Some sheets had half a line on them—scratched out generally. Some had only one word, also scratched out. Not even the broadness of the “J”-nibbed pens was smooth enough to carry her thoughts along to-day.

“Down in the valley,” she wrote very slowly, “grew a little vine.”

There she stopped that she might read aloud what she had written.

“Yes,” she said to herself. She bit her pen-handle for a minute, changed little vine to Little Vine, then began again.

“Over there to westward lay a long, green valley, and from its grew up a Little Vine.”

She paused and looked at that for a while.

“From its what?” she said. “What’s the word? What do I mean? From its arms? its sides? heights? depths? Depths sounds best.”

She filled the blank with “depths.” Then she

read the sentence over again, once, twice, but before she could read it a third time, she scratched it out.

"Oh dear!" she said. Her sigh was suggestive of hard work, and attendant weariness. She dropped her pen, and stopped to pin her hair back from her cheek. She had to take a hairpin from the knot at the back of her head to do this, and the withdrawal of the hairpin brought the whole mass of her hair tumbling about her shoulders. The sun, shining in through the open window, caught it, and sparkled in it, and burnt it till there were red lights in it as well as golden ones.

"How pretty," she said. "I'm glad I've got nice hair." She let the "Little Vine" go out of her head as she leaned it down on the table, and made her hair sweep over the papers in a patch of sunlight. She looked at it with half-closed eyes.

"Women with red-brown hair are supposed to be fascinating. I wonder if it means girls whose hair gets red in the sun." Her eyes were shut now and her voice was dangerously suggestive of sleep.

"I'm coming in," said a voice, some time after. A girl opened the door as she spoke, and came in.

"What are you doing?" she said abruptly.

"Writing," said Ariadne, sitting up suddenly and blinking.

"On your hair? And with your eyes shut?"

"I was just looking at my hair for a minute, and my eyes must have shut themselves," lamely.

"I believe that's how you spend most of your work-time," said Kit O'Dowell candidly. She took her hat off, and threw herself into a downy easy chair.

Kit was taller than Ariadne, and much thinner, and

enjoyed the reputation of being the most peculiar girl in Gloucestershire. There was no good feature in her face, except her short and shapely nose, but the light in her eyes and the expressiveness of her mouth made her strangely attractive. Her eyebrows were two fine, black triangles, that moved up and down when she laughed and talked. Her teeth were very white, and very crooked, and her mouth showed them all suddenly when she smiled. Ariadne said it was those crooked teeth that made her face so fascinating. The eyes were brown, with curly black lashes, and though they were not very large they mirrored every smile and frown that crossed her face. Sometimes they were absolutely bubbling with laughter, and sometimes when they were looking at a man, they would be most soft and gentle, and other girls would say this girl was flirting.

She was slight and very graceful. Not even the extreme shabbiness of her attire could hide her grace.

"I've had the blues," she said. "Badly. That's why I came to see you. I can't write a word. I can see in and out of my brain, and it's as empty as an eggshell when the egg's been eaten. It's horrible. I want to buy a new pair of boots next week, and I can't even write half-a-guinea's worth of verses."

"Poor Kit!" said Ariadne, whose patent shoes always shone beautifully nowadays.

"What about you? Are your ideas shrivelled too? Or does genius flow? I see you've got a new box of J's, and two new novels, and a box of chocolates!"

"I'm writing chapter two of my book," said Ariadne defensively.

"What book?"

"The one you were reading here the other day."

"Oh Ariadne, surely you're not going to keep on with that!"

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't."

Kit looked Ariadne firmly in the face.

"I read the first chapter you know," she said.

"Well?" said Ariadne.

"You have a kitchen fireplace."

"Oh, but I've altered it since then. I've scratched out nearly all the adjectives, and altered all the girls' names, and the men's too. I called Dorothy, Mary; and Guy, James. And Estelle and Gladys and Antony I altered to Alice and Rhoda and Dick. Those were your chief objections."

Ariadne watched Kit's face.

Kit sat up, and clasped her hands round her knees.

"It's a funny thing," she said, looking straight in front of her. "When you, or anybody who likes me, cuts me up, I let it pass over me like a west wind, nasty, but not harmful. I believe I have a kink in my composition. I believe in the praise of my enemies, but not the blame of my friends. There's an epigram for you. The meanness of my nature makes me suspect some personal undertone when my friends blame me. But there's none of it in my criticisms of you. I honestly believe there's none. I'm not jealous of you. I don't envy you. There's *none*," still staring straight in front of her.

Then her eyes came to Ariadne's face, and she laughed.

"That will prepare you for what I'm going to say. You buy two pairs of shoes at a time and twenty

pairs of gloves, if you like. You have unlimited boxes at theatres when you go to town, and an account with the book-shops. You have a husband, and you can send your MS. to be typewritten. You can bear it."

"Go on," said Ariadne; "you're going to be brutal."

"I'm going to be candid. I didn't come to be candid—or brutal. But I'm in the mood so I'll tell you—I have more brains than you, Ariadne. That's all the enunciation we're to go on. The authority is myself, and the fact that I never write when I've been reading novels and drinking tea. And about that story of yours——"

"Go on. Go straight."

"I will. You've no originality. You've no freshness. You've no wit. You have a certain amount of style, but it's borrowed, it's not characteristic. It's reminiscent. I hate your stories. Why do you always give your girls golden fluffy hair, and sweet, ripe scarlet lips? And no brains. I'd make them as bald as the woman before she used Barry's Tricopherus, and as white about the lips as if they had eaten a barrel-load of starch, but when they spoke I would make them say something smart, and to the point, something worth saying, and worth listening to, not a string of empty meaningless frippery."

She stopped suddenly, and looked blankly at Ariadne.

"I wonder why I don't do it," she said. And the humour of this filled the boudoir with peals of laughter for many minutes after.

Then Ariadne began to defend herself. She was not likely to let so sharp an attack go unrepulsed.

"You must remember," said she, "that I was only nineteen last birthday, while you are twenty-four

nearly. You are the only girl I really know about here, so how can I make my girls talk cleverly? I copy nature. How can I make them epigrammatic?"

"How can you make them pretty?" digging a ditch.

"Oh, but you are pretty," falling in at once.

"Ariadne, you're too obvious for anything. You fall in at a finger-touch. If you want to be sarcastic you must hide your tools a little better. I can always see you carving out your sarcasm with a bread-knife."

"I don't see why I should make my women talk differently from real women. How many does one meet who talk cleverly?"

"How many does one meet who are worth writing about at all? Ten? Twenty? Look through fiction. You could count all the great women characters on four hands, on two, perhaps. More than half have come from one man's pen, George Meredith."

"But look through history. History proves that there were more than twenty women worth writing about."

"Not as characters. Only as bits of spectacular dramas, as threads in tapestries too immense to be lifted bodily into a book. The tapestries would not have fallen to pieces without them. They would have been less gorgeous, but would have held together. But the threads taken out of the tapestries would have lost their colour, and been barely beautiful and wholly ineffectual."

"But men say that women who talk cleverly are a bore. They dislike clever women as a rule."

"Clever men don't. Men don't like women to be clever enough to see through them, but they like a

woman with brains enough to appreciate their appreciations."

"But what am I to do with my women? What am I to make them say?"

"Make them say things to the point. You always keep them at the point of making conversation, your story in the meantime standing deadly still."

"You are horrid. Don't you think I have any brains then?"

"I'm sure you have. I never heard anything neater than the way you told our kiddies fairy tales. But you can't write, Ariadne, you *can't* write."

"Everybody does not think with you," remembering Alice's whole-souled admiration of some of her secret MSS.

"You'll never master the first principle of your art—brevity. If you want to say it rains, say it rains. La Bruyère said that. Now you would say, 'the cold rain fell with a plaintive moan.'"

"I wouldn't," said Ariadne indignantly.

"No? Well. 'The rain-clouds burst with a dreary wail, and the white wet rain swept over the land.'"

"Well, I don't elaborate when I call you a pig."

"Perhaps I'm in a bad temper," said Kit presently.

"Have some tea," said Ariadne, "and we'll discuss that afterwards."

She got up and rang the bell, and tea was brought in quickly.

"When I want tea I have to go into the kitchen and make it," said Kit O'Dowell, plaintively, watching Ariadne with the Queen Anne silver teapot.

"What fun! I used to at home. I miss it sometimes now."

"Fun! I never thought of it in that way. I suppose then you'd call it fun to wear a hat without any trimming and shoes without any soles."

"Certainly," said Ariadne. "Immense fun. I'd love to see myself doing it again."

"I believe I could do something if I had everything I wanted. If I had always nice shoes and a little nest of my own, and no worry about money."

"How you harp on the shoes. I never notice yours."

"Reason why—I always keep them hidden." Kit put her foot forth. "But see!"

They could scarcely have been shabbier.

"But you don't write with your feet," said Ariadne. She felt as if this was a reflection on herself for not writing better.

"No, but I could write better if my shoes were dainty and bronzed and comfortable and beaded and Louis-heeled, like yours."

"You *could*!"

Ariadne put the teapot down, and began suddenly to slip off her shoes.

"Then try," she said. "Just try for a minute. And I'll put on yours without any soles and your hat without any trimming and your gloves without any——"

"Fit."

"And we'll see if it makes any difference to our mighty intellects."

The friend had small neat feet, and Ariadne's shoes set them off to perfection. She stood and stared at them and pulled her dress up a little.

"Lend me that red silk tea-gown of yours." Ariadne produced it from the other room, and helped Kit to slip it on over her dress. It was a beautiful thing, all

frills and lace and warm rich colour, and the friend's dark face seemed to glow out of it with a sudden accession of loveliness.

Ariadne took Kit's little black sailor hat, with its narrow ribbon band, and put it on her head, and slipped her hands into Kit's fitless gloves, then began to laugh.

"Now," said Kit, triumphantly, fastening up the bottom button of her tea-gown.

"Well!" said Ariadne.

"Could *you* think with those shoes floating about on your feet, and the knowledge that those terrible gloves were your best?"

Kit drew herself up, looked admiringly over her shoulder, sat down in a wicker chair for a moment, and let her head sink into a luxurious eider-down cushion. Then she got up, and trailed about the room, and going to the desk sat down there, took up a carven pen with a gold J-nib in it, and began to write:—

Fame came to me in my sleep;
Oh, the sweet wild, dreamless dreaming!
I looked to the highest steep,
I leapt with a long straight leap,
Till the world was wind beneath me.
I laughed and leapt with the winds and sun,
A god I burst through them one by one.
Far down through sunlight and redheaped cloud,
The watching world to my footsteps bowed,
Then the sting of a myriad hand-claps broke
On the air like hail, and I laughed and woke.
Just for a moment's lightning dream,
I leapt to godhead, I ruled supreme.
But the sting of Fame's poisoned arrow glows
In my heart, and the dart will never close.

"I could go on for ever," she said, throwing down

the pen. "Oh, it's disgusting to be poor, to have ten brothers and sisters with tremendous appetites and big minds that require to be educated in the very best manner possible. Do you know, sometimes I sit down and think, and see an endless succession of days of failure, and I feel I can't stand things any longer. Teaching is so horrible. It takes the curl out of your hair, and the backbone from your body, and gives you dirty nails, and a contemptible mental attitude, and a bad temper. My heart nearly breaks sometimes with its weight of wants. I want time, I am getting so old. I want to go away, anywhere, anywhere, into the world. Oh, if I could only go to some wild place! I believe I could write there. But here I am good-for-nothing. I can't write about Gloucestershire, it doesn't appeal to me. I can't get hold of it. What is there in a place like this to wake one up? I have never taken this country into my soul and never will until I get away from it, which reminds me, Ariadne, I'm going up to London soon, to see if I can't get in somewhere with my pen. I mean to batch it in a boarding-house while I feel my way."

There was something deeper than a literary kinship in the kiss Ariadne gave her at parting.

"My hat straight? Good-bye. You have done me good," said Kit. "It is a wonderful outlet for your depression to abuse somebody you like. Let me whisper one thing to you, Ariadne. You've made a great difference in my life since you came to live at Harding Hall," and the sound of that was sweet in Ariadne's ears.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FAMILY FROM AUSTRALIA

EDWARD sat in a stiff chair in a corner of the O'Dowell's drawing-room and tried not to look at his young wife, who was enjoying herself immensely, as she always did enjoy herself here, for somehow the place and the people both reminded her of the Manor.

She gave a furtive and happy glance around the room, thinking to herself how nice it was that Edward should also like to come to this house. Already she knew every detail of the room by heart, and yet to-night she looked at it wonderingly. It was not even a big room, and it was shabby and worn-out almost to the last degree. The sofas had long since parted with their springs, and went down with a horrid rapidity if you sat down on them too quickly. The carpet-pattern had been trodden out of all recognition by big and little feet. The window-curtains were thick with darns. The palms and flowers about the table were as often as not arranged in empty jam-tins or salt-bottles, cleverly disguised by an artistic younger sister of Kit's. An armchair with a frill round it, had a log of wood in place of one of its legs, and Lady O'Dowell had been bidden to sit in it all the evening to save accidents, in case any one should try to alter its position.

Seen in the daylight, "Poverty," was written on every article in the room, and yet, of all the rooms Ariadne knew in the neighbourhood, there was not one with such an electrical atmosphere of gaiety and happiness about it as this shabby little place possessed. There was something deliciously infectious floating about in the air of it. Everybody was brighter here than anywhere else. People talked more brilliantly, laughed more naturally, and found themselves of more importance.

The secret of it was that everybody felt at home. And the people who came there knew well that the passport through that blistering old front-door was neither wealth, nor prospects, nor position. It was brains and human kindness.

Lady O'Dowell was a dear little woman, with only one good gown in the world, a sense of humour, and fingers that loved the feel of the leaves of new books. Sir James O'Dowell, Bart., was a dreamy old man with a hundred hobbies, and an abnormally receptive mind. He knew something about everything (except money-making, his wife said). Whatever topic was started, he had always something interesting to say about it, and he always listened to what any one told him.

He wandered across the room and drew a chair up to Edward. "Do you know anything about Paythorpe's new picture?"

They were lost to the world for awhile.

The mother was deep in a discussion with an ugly man who believed that the University was a very much over-rated factor. He brought forward Walt Whitman as the type of man University life would have cramped and spoilt. The mother was a little aghast.

She had a respect for Universities, and urged all her sons thither.

Kit was entertaining a man called "Monty," who was in love with her, and another man, with her brisk bright talk. A younger sister was playing bits of Schumann with a scholarly touch, and an old lady sat near the piano listening happily.

"What a blessed little place it is," said Ariadne involuntarily to Edward, as she found him near her.

"It is," replied Edward heartily.

A little quick glow of good fellowship warmed her heart. She was pleased with him for being so spontaneous, for these people had a warm place in her regard, and she looked at him and smiled.

The clatter of cups interrupted them, and Edward went away to get her some coffee. Kit came hurriedly across the room and sat down in his vacant seat.

"Ariadne," in a whisper, "for Heaven's sake only have one cup of coffee. I don't believe it will go round. Jimmie drank half the milk, little wretch, and I could only make one potful."

Ariadne began to laugh.

"You *funny* things!" she said.

"Indeed it isn't. It's awful. But I knew Mr. Harding or somebody would ask you to have some more, so I thought I'd warn you. I don't mind *you*."

She flew away again.

A little later in the evening, as Ariadne was chatting with a celebrated scientist, Sir James came along and stopped in front of her.

"Let me get you some more coffee," he said.

"Not any more, thank you," said Ariadne.

"Oh do have another cup," he urged hospitably.

She had turned to continue her talk with Dr. Harrison and did not notice that he was waiting for a reply. After a minute he murmured, "Silence means consent," and picking up her empty cup took it over to the table where Kit stood near the coffee tray.

"Mrs. Harding will have some more coffee, dear," he said.

"Let me take it to her," said Edward, who stood near by eating one of the little cakes. A desperate look crossed Kit's face. She shook the coffee-pot a little, said "Wait a minute," and went out of the room.

In the kitchen there were three boys and a girl, all eating bread and dripping, and talking about the people inside. Kit burst on them suddenly.

"Is there any more coffee at all?" she asked.

"Not a drop," said the little sister with the long brown hair, "of course there isn't."

"Whatever shall I do?"

"Why, wasn't there enough to go round?" asked the boys.

"That papa went and begged Ariadne to have some more, and Mr. Harding is waiting there to give it to her."

They ceased to eat their bread and dripping, and stared sympathetically at her.

"Why doesn't papa mind his own business," they said indignantly.

"Oh *why* did I ever think of asking any one to come," said Kit. "I never will again."

"Y' always say that. Y' ask them all the same, though," said one of the boys.

"I don't know what to do," despairingly.

"Why didn't you tell Mrs. Harding not to have two cups?"

"I did."

"Well, she's a nice one."

"She must have forgotten."

"Let us pour some hot water on the grains," said the little sister. "There's no milk, and she won't be able to drink it, but she won't say anything."

"That's all I can do," said Kit.

A few minutes after a cup of coffee was handed to Ariadne. She took it absently, and sipped it. It was quite cold and so exceedingly nasty, and so strongly reminiscent of dish-water, that she looked up in involuntary surprise. But across the room she caught Kit's eyes frowning fiercely at her, and at the same time she became aware that heads were peeping at her through the door that opened into the hall. A sudden spasm of remembrance flashed through her.

"I promised not to have any more. They must have faked this up for me," she said remorsefully. Then she drank every drop of it with an unmoved face. She liked them all the better for it, and though the contrast was extreme between the county-people's elaborate entertainments, and this little pitiful attempt at refreshment, she told herself that these evenings were a hundred times nicer than those others.

That night, arriving home very late from the O'Dowells, Ariadne found herself unable to unfasten her princess gown, which was buttoned with innumerable buttons all the way up the back. Try as she would her fingers could not reach to the six middle buttons. She tried to wriggle out. In vain. The gown fitted her like a glove. No wriggling, no contortions, made any difference.

The simplest thing to do was to go and wake her

maid, but Jane had been suffering badly from toothache for the last two or three days, and was now probably enjoying a little peaceful slumber. To wake her seemed cruel. The only other thing was to keep her frock on all night, and get the maid to take it off in the morning. Ariadne had just made up her mind to that when another thought struck her. Would not the maid wonder why she had not asked Edward to unfasten it? Of course she would. It would be the first thing that would come into the girl's head.

"I think I must ask him," said Ariadne to herself, hesitatingly. "After all, it's nothing. It's only six buttons in the middle of my back. He won't mind. Sandy and Jocelyn have often hooked our blouses for us."

Throwing a big cloak round her she went downstairs into the drawing-room.

Softly, noiselessly, she paused on the threshold of the great pale drawing-room, with a dull blue cloak of velvet thrown carelessly round her white shoulders.

But now that she was here, and could see Edward, who sat staring into the fire away at the far end of the room, with a curious intent look on his face, a sudden nervousness overcame her. It had seemed the easiest thing in the world to explain what had happened, and ask him to help her out of her quandary, but now that she was here, she found herself suddenly paralysed.

Edward turned, looked up and saw her, standing there in the doorway. He rose to his feet.

"What's the matter? Can I do anything for you?" he said quickly coming towards her.

"Nothing is the matter," said Ariadne, "I—I came to get a book."

She had to go through a violent mental exercise before she could recall the name of any single book on earth, so confused was she at the way Edward was looking at her and his obvious air of surprise. But at last she managed to fasten on a title, seeing the book in question just under her eyes on a side table.

"It was *The Life of the Bee*," she said quickly, "Maeterlinck's. Here it is!" She pounced on the book, said good-night again, and quickly left the room.

Her cheeks were scarlet and the worst of it was that she had felt that mantling blush blazoning itself out before Edward's eyes. What could he have thought of her? And what would he have thought of her if he had known what she had come for? She flew up the stairs like lightning and hurried into her own room. Somehow she knew that no power on earth could have induced her to have asked Edward to help her as she had meant to do. All in a moment that had become impossible. As soon as he came near her she had realized it. All thought of Sandy and Jocelyn had vanished, and Edward had changed into a man, a stranger.

In her own room she stood for a long time staring helplessly at the floor. Her quandary was still as marked as ever. She was still cased up in a tight-fitting satin gown. There was still the maid's wonder to face in the morning if she came in and found her mistress in her evening toilette.

Yet what had happened to make it so impossible? Why was it that all thought of Sandy and Jocelyn had vanished, and Edward had suddenly changed into some one who was utterly aloof from any one else in the world? And what was it, that aloofness?

What curious quality did it conceal? For in truth, though she had sensed in that strange piercing moment his immense remoteness from any one else she had ever met in all her nineteen vivid years of life, yet she had learnt in that same moment how strangely near she had been coming to him all these weeks. It had almost seemed to her that it was because he was no stranger that she could not tell him why she had come.

A desperate look crossed Ariadne's face. She set her teeth, and held her head high; she was not going to be routed by a mere frock.

It was an awful, a recklessly extravagant thing that she was about to do, but she would do it, she must do it. Going over to her dressing-table, she took a sharp pair of scissors, and deliberately began to cut her gown open down the front from neck to hem.

"There, that's ruined," she said. "It was so pretty too, so beautifully cut. I've only worn it twice. And now, it's ruined." She looked at it with eyes into which actual tears crept, so childish and intense was her distress at what she had done.

Then she folded the gown up carefully, reverently almost, and locked it away where it should never be seen.

As she crept into bed that night, she wondered what Alice would have done under similar circumstances.

For herself, she knew she could not have done differently.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN LONDON ISN'T LONDON

TO Ariadne's disappointment her new friend was soon taken from her.

Kit packed her dingy boxes, glossed her black sailor hat together with her boots, put a new ribbon round it, and set off in a third-class carriage on her journey into the unknown world of London.

Ariadne found it depressing to have no thin, shabby figure coming in unexpectedly, to throw herself on the boudoir sofa and tell what she had been doing through the day, and listen to what Ariadne had to say. Up there in the boudoir with the door shut and locked, they had made fun of people as they pleased; nobody ever interrupted them, and when their laughter floated away down the staircase nobody came rushing in to see what they were laughing at. At the O'Dowells it was very different, so Kit had come often to Harding Hall for rest and confidences and Ariadne missed her as much as she could miss any one just then. After a while she began quite unconsciously to look round to fill the vacant place, but finding no one except Edward, she drew a little nearer to him than before.

Together they read the first quaint letter that came from Kit.

DEAR ARIADNE,—

This girl is beginning to realize that there is no

such place as the London she thought she was coming to.

Does she regret the difference ?

Does any one regret the cakes she didn't get in a dream ?

My London that I thought I was coming to, was the airiest, drollest dream. It was peopled with Poets, and Novelists, and Essayists, and the King and Queen, and the *Times*, and the Tower of London, and Irving and Ellen Terry, and Madame Tussaud, and Mr. Chamberlain, and the Poet Laureate—a rare mixture.

For surroundings, there were flaming gin-palaces, thick white snow over ground and houses, endless crossing-sweepers, lovely flower girls, and many other traditional characteristics, all gleaned from literature. One of the first questions I asked when I came to London was "*Where are the gin-palaces ?*" I was answered by a burst of laughter. Then my Australian friend said, "I remember asking that very question when *I* first came to London." The truth is (let me whisper it softly) gin-palaces are not palaces at all ; they are just common, ordinary public-houses, such as we have ourselves in Australia. They differ only in two points—these have brighter lights, and more people coming out of them.

London, as it seems to me, is a place where you lose people, rather than find them. Many of the gods we worship in the country seem unknown here. I dare not mention them by name, for they are mostly poets. But where are they ? I want to find them, so that I can tell them that twelve thousand miles away, across the Mediterranean, across the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, dwells a nation who reads their poems, who worships at their feet, who puts them

on the pedestals that are theirs by right and achievement, and who believes that London worships them with an even greater fervour.

I have looked on all the pedestals, but I have not found half our idols yet. Most of our idols are poets, because we love poetry, we encourage poetry, as no other nation in the world does to-day. Our rawest Bushie knows our poets' poems, can mooningly recite to you, "Out on the wastes of the Never Never, that's where the dead men lie," or "How we beat the Favourite."

Who from Bayswater, with a butler, wanders in the Park, murmuring, "Then all my heart with joy o'erfills and dances with the daffodils," by his own Wordsworth? Or who comes out under the trees from Park Lane, and lilts into the spring morning, "I dreamed that as I wandered by the way," by his own Shelley? Or who turns from London to the sea to ramble on the cliffs and murmur of the deserted garden, "In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland, at the sea down's edge, between windward and lee"—by his own Swinburne?

In London, he who does these strange, weird things, if he be any one at all, is himself a poet. But in Australia he may be any one—a Bushie, a horse-breaker, a drover, a commercial traveller, a squatter, a selector, or even a way-back public-house keeper.

What a different London from a Londoner's London is the London of the Colonial. London, as it seems to me, is the most beautiful city in the world. But I rarely find a Londoner who agrees with me. Looking at me wistfully, he will remark: "Australia must be a lovely place; I should like to go there."

If I say, "It is very hot," he generally says, "I should like that." And I can see that he, too, is drawing his dream-pictures, imagining himself in Australia, leading a lazy, happy-go-lucky life out of doors under sunny skies, on horseback, after cattle, after kangaroos, anywhere, anything, as long as it is not London. Far fields are green, and London, to him, is grey.

But there are days when London isn't London; she is Venice, she is Sydney, she is the far, far East. I found Venice in her once as I sat on top of a 'bus, going out to Maida Vale. It was four in the evening. The sun was near setting. Suddenly a canal flashed on our left. The long, smooth, narrow stretch ran away between tall brown houses. A red sun lay like a fallen rose on the face of the still water. In the sky, the other sun glowed in the midst of a vast rose flush, that seemed to hover behind a soft and shrouding mist of thinnest, dimmest grey. Only a moment, while the 'bus halted for a passenger, was allowed for the scene. Then we passed, and went on among big rows of houses, though overhead was still a tender exquisite sky. But soon there came again to me the memory of that slim canal, in a London side-street, holding the sun like a rose to its breast, and often and often it does for me what the daffodils did to Wordsworth—flashes "upon that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude."

To find London beautiful was an intense surprise. I had expected to find it crowded, and interesting, and enormous, and loud, and great, but never beautiful. Nobody had ever told me in song or story, of the lovely things in London's skies and trees and river. It is possible that strangers from lands of different

colourings see most vividly the London that really is London, a city with a rare and exquisite beauty of its own, a haunting, seductive beauty, quite apart from its high majesty, its glamour of wealth, its pomp of size. All through the autumn and the winter there are atmospheric effects hovering about us here that turn London into a poem waiting to be written. Up in skies, which writers hurriedly and cruelly describe as "grey" you will find, if you look, an indescribable tenderness of tone, subtle colourings, pale memories of dawns and sunsets, even in mid-morning. These creep into vivid Australian skies only at dawn or sunset ; therefore in London they still have for us the precious quality that belongs to those two great sacred hours.

In truth, in very truth, the grey is seldom really grey. Some dim rose, more like a reflection than a real rose, some vaporous orange or amber, some clouded melted mauve is ever hovering behind the grey. One cannot see where these soft lights begin or end. They are baffling, subtle things ; even as you look they fade away, or deepen, but gently, with no ostentation.

To-morrow I'm going to see an Editor. I'll tell you what happens, and you, Ariadne, write me what flowers are in your Lowestoft bowls, and what music stands open on your piano.

Yours ever,

K. O'D.

CHAPTER X

THE YOUTH WITH THE GREEN EYES

THE days went drifting on and again it rained. It rained and it rained and it rained till all the countryside was in flood ; neighbours were cut off from neighbours ; garden-parties, dinners, fêtes, were flaunted and died miserable, shivering little deaths ; the whole world seemed to weep at its temerity in daring to have assumed that because it was July it must be summer, and because it was summer there would be sun. Up at Harding Hall, on the slope of those low sweet hills that looked out far across the fair valley of the Severn, Edward Harding and his wife were shut up together, day after day, seeing no one but themselves.

One morning Edward observed at lunch, cheerfully—
“ Raining again ! ”

“ Well, we shall have no visitors to-day,” said Ariadne contentedly. “ Nobody would be mad enough to venture out in weather like this. It’s so much nicer to stay at home and read and dream by a big fire, don’t you think so ? ”

“ Yes, I quite think so,” said Edward. “ Unfortunately, though, I’ve got to go out between now and tea-time. I’ve got a meeting on of some architects and engineers in the village about these new houses for the poor we’ve been working on lately. House the people properly, say I, that’s more than half the battle

of life. That's what I am frightfully keen on just now as you know. But it takes a lot of thinking out."

Ariadne's grey eyes sent him a shy look of sympathy.

It gave her a beautiful sense of contentment to know that this man was living for others as well as for himself. Not from him himself did she learn all these things he busied himself about, but in a hundred little indirect ways the knowledge came to her of his kindness and charities, and his advice and assistance to the poor in the district.

A loud ringing of the front-door bell sounded through the house just then, and almost immediately the dining-room door was thrown open impetuously, unceremoniously, and in walked a young man in riding costume apparently wet through to the skin.

"Etienne!" exclaimed Edward visibly surprised.

The new-comer had come to a standstill just inside the door, and holding his hat in his hand, was standing in an attitude of extreme deference and politeness, his eyes fixed on Ariadne's face. He was a tall, slim creature. No one more unEnglish could possibly have been imagined, and yet he had been to Oxford, and modelled himself on the most approved English lines in many ways. His black head was sleek and oval, and the hair was parted in the middle and brushed down with an exaggerated smoothness, till the head looked more or less like a drawn-out cocoanut. His face was swarthy in colouring, and his eyes were a strange brilliant green, with eyelashes that looked too black and long for a man, and intensely black eyebrows. A sort of half-conscious, half-cultivated grace pervaded

his every movement, and as he stood there, yet bending his head with his eyes cast down now, Ariadne looked at him with interest.

Their eyes met. A flash of pleasure went through Etienne's, but he said nothing. He waited for Edward to introduce him.

"This is my wife," said Edward. "Ariadne, this is Etienne Bouleran—you've heard of him—my cousin."

They shook hands, and Etienne, bending his sleek head, imprinted a kiss on the fair fingers of his cousin's wife.

"How on earth did you get here?" asked Edward. "There's no train from anywhere at this time of the day."

Etienne looked a trifle confused.

"Oh, the fact is, Cousin Edward," he said suavely, "I'm staying in the neighbourhood."

"Indeed! With whom?"

Edward's face contracted.

"With Mrs. Allistone. She has a house-party there—such a jolly lot of people! She invited me some time ago to come down, but I never was able to before."

"Mrs. Allistone!" Edward repeated the name, shrugged his shoulders, and regarded Etienne with a distinctly uncompromising stare. "So you're staying at the Laurels, are you? Well, I'm extremely sorry to hear it."

Etienne laughed.

"But really, Cousin Edward, it is very jolly there," he said airily.

Ariadne, seeing that there was some constraint between the two, here interposed with domestic queries

as to whether Etienne had lunched, and about his wet clothes. He looked at her gratefully. He had lunched early. He thanked her very much. But certainly he was very wet, wet to the skin, and he would be very glad of a change of clothes.

Edward despatched him to his room, and sent his valet to look after him, while Ariadne went off to her beloved little boudoir.

Edward followed after a moment.

"I'm bound to be over in the village by three o'clock," he said, "but I'll be back by half-past four. I've asked Etienne what he means to do, and he says he'll stay and wait here till I come back, as he wants to see me rather particularly. Do you mind, Ariadne?"

And a voice at the door—a clear, suave, ingratiating voice—said—

"I do hope you don't mind, Cousin Ariadne?"

And there stood Etienne, who had rapidly attired himself in some of Edward's things, which he wore with the airy, nonchalant grace that characterized all his conduct.

"Shall I be frightfully in the way?"

"Of course not," said Ariadne heartily.

As he was Edward's cousin she invited him to come and sit by the cosy fire, and ran about looking for cigarettes. Edward stood by for a moment, and then disappeared, muttering that he would be back by tea-time.

Returning at tea-time, Edward found his wife and cousin deep in animated conversation, but after tea he and Etienne went off to his den, and there the note changed.

Just before the second bell rang, Ariadne paused at

the door to inquire if Etienne was dining with them, and the sound of loud voices reached her. "I'm hanged if I will!" she heard Edward say. "I've done it three times for you already, Etienne. Last time I told you it would be the last. I wonder you have the conscience to come and ask me!"

"But just this once, Cousin Edward!" pleaded Etienne.

"I won't do it!" said Edward sternly. "The truest kindness to you is to refuse."

Ariadne stole away and went into the drawing-room, and a few moments afterwards Etienne entered, his face pale, his eyes gleaming. Edward had gone upstairs to dress.

"Are you staying to dine with us?" asked Ariadne gently, endeavouring to ignore his looks.

"I fear not."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It is very kind of you."

He looked at her with a strange pondering glance, taking in her sweetness as she stood there by the fire-side in her white satin evening gown, with some red roses tucked carelessly into the front of her corsage.

"I wish you would do something for me," he said suddenly.

"Oh I should love to!" cried Ariadne, girlishly. "What is it?"

"Well, it's about Mrs. Allistone."

"But who is Mrs. Allistone? I thought Edward seemed rather annoyed about her. Was he?"

"She's the most charming woman in the world," said Etienne solemnly. "She's so brave, so splendid. She's quite young, and very fascinating. Yes, you

were right about Edward—he doesn't like her very much. He doesn't understand her."

"What a pity!" said Ariadne sympathetically. "I should like to meet her."

Etienne stared at her, and through his green eyes a whole line of thought went flashing with the swiftness of mercury.

"And she would love to meet you," he said.

"She hasn't called on me," said Ariadne. "I've noticed the Laurels. I think it is the most sweetly pretty house. It always reminds me of some little pink villa on the Tuscan Hills, with those two trees at its gate."

"Listen, Ariadne. You write to Mrs. Allistone and ask her to come and see you," prompted Etienne. "You don't know what a good turn you would be doing her. Come, write now. Write her one of those pretty little notes that women know how to turn out, and I'll take it to her. Ask her to come and have tea with you to-morrow. She'll be delighted."

"Of course I will," said Ariadne instantly.

Jumping up, she dashed off the note, handing it to Etienne, remarking gaily as she did so, "Perhaps it would be nice for Edward to see more of her, then he may like her better. My theory is that the less you know of people the less you like them, and *vice versa*."

Etienne smiled brightly at her, and placed the letter carefully away in an inner pocket.

"Let us keep it a secret from my dear cousin Edward, shall we?" he said craftily. "Let's make it a nice little surprise for him when he comes home to-morrow to find her here. I think that's always the best way if you want to bring people together."

"I quite agree with you," said Ariadne.

She little thought what agreeing with Etienne signified.

* * * * *

Next afternoon Edward went over to the village to meet his architects again, and all the while he was thinking about Etienne and wondering how he ought to act. He knew a good deal about Mrs. Allistone. In every way he disapproved of her. But as the dog-cart dashed along on its way back to the Hall, his thoughts grew softer, for it was Ariadne he was thinking of now. He pictured her sitting in a white frock by the boudoir fire, waiting for him to come and have tea with her. That room was so sweet, now that it belonged to her. And she would look up at him, and those grey eyes would meet his for a moment, and then fall. And then he would sit near her. She would pour his tea out with her own white hands, and they would talk. And in the background of his mind he would be saying to himself all the time, as he was saying now, "She is mine. She is my wife. Nobody can take her from me!"

He hastened into the boudoir, throwing his great-coat off hurriedly in the hall.

Voices reached him.

Some one was laughing, and he started and stood dead still. There was something about that laugh that turned him cold all over—it was a low, thrilling laugh—artificial, worldly, theatrical—the sort of laugh that a man like Edward Harding would detest above all others.

He turned the handle and entered. Ariadne was sitting by the fire on a tiny chintz-covered settee, and

at her side was seated Mrs. Allistone, and opposite them was Etienne. They were all having tea together, and looked the very picture of happiness and high spirits.

For a moment Edward stood transfixed; then he went forward and shook hands with his visitors.

Etienne shot a triumphant look into his eyes.

Presently Mrs. Allistone rose to go, and, pressing Ariadne's hands in hers, said in those artificially-sweet tones of hers—

"I do hope that we shall see a great deal of each other, my dear."

When she was gone there was a somewhat strained silence. Ariadne feeling uneasy, thought the cousins wished to talk to each other alone, and glided noiselessly out of the room.

"How dare you bring Mrs. Allistone here!" were Edward's first words, when the door closed behind Ariadne.

"Bring her? What do you mean?" said Etienne. "She came by Ariadne's special invitation."

"Ariadne has never heard of her before!"

"But softly, softly, *mon cousin!*" said Etienne. "Ariadne wrote her with her own hand and invited her to come to tea to-day. Ah, she did not tell you, I see! Ah well, Cousin Edward, young wives do not always tell their husbands everything."

Edward's face suddenly assumed an absolutely impassive expression. He looked straight into Etienne's eyes, and his glance was like a rapier.

"Go out of this house within two minutes, or I'll have you put out!" he said in low unhurried tones.

"I'm very sorry," said Etienne, with a laugh, moving

towards the door—"sorry for you, *mon cousin*, I mean," he said. "But if one marries a young wife, one must expect that she has secrets, *n'est ce pas ?* Au revoir ! As for the money, it doesn't matter about that. There are other ways of getting it besides from misers like you !" And he was gone.

CHAPTER XI

THE GUNSHOT IN THE WOOD

THE rain had ceased at last. A soft, sweet night, fair, balmy, summery, with a silvery baby moon in the skies, was wiping out memories of the long, grey days of wet and wind.

After dinner that evening, on her way to the piano, Ariadne paused for a moment at Edward's side.

"What would you like me to play?" she asked.

Every night now after dinner, she made music for him.

"Not the Rain-Drop Prelude to-night," said Edward. "The Moonlight Sonata, perhaps."

He was seated on a little sofa, and suddenly he reached up, caught her hand, and drew her down beside him.

He looked at her earnestly. "Our marriage has been a strange affair!"

"I hope you are not unhappy," was all she could find to reply.

"I? No; it is *you* I'm thinking of, Ariadne."

A little white hand came like a snowflake on his coat-sleeve and Ariadne's face was turned up to his with an expression of intense earnestness that even her shyness and shrinking at that moment could not conceal.

"I know I must be very different from what Alice

would have been, I'm younger—I am foolish—I feel it—but. . . .” She paused and hesitated, and for a moment a strange, sweet silence wrapped them round in a soft embrace. “But I am very happy,” she ended. “If only you were!” Side by side they sat there. Her hand had fallen from his arm and had joined the other in her lap. Edward looked down at her.

“That I didn't marry Alice is the most blessed and wonderful thing that ever happened to me in my life.”

Again they remained wrapped in that strange, sweet stillness.

Then there was a fluttering movement and Ariadne had suddenly sprung up and hurried noiselessly out of the drawing-room. Some overwhelming emotion had seized her. She could stay there no longer by Edward's side. She was afraid. That was it. But with the fear was a feeling that was very different from fear. Yet—though it was not fear—it frightened, it terrified her, and she hurried through the open doors out on to the verandah, and stealing down the great stone steps, went swiftly through the rose garden. She wandered about, a slim white figure, in the pale, misty moonlight. From the yellow roses she passed to the red ones, touching them with tender fingers and bending her fair head over them to catch their perfume. But all the while she heard nothing but that voice—

“. . . . the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me in my life.”

After a long time she roamed back towards the house slowly mounting the steps, and pausing on the verandah, her heart beating under a dozen conflicting emotions, when suddenly something startled her right out of herself and her dreams.

From the wood on the right came the sharp unmistakable sound of a shot.

The flowers she had gathered fell in a mass from her arms.

She hurried into the drawing-room calling, "Edward, Edward!" in a loud frightened voice.

But Edward was nowhere to be seen.

Then she fled down the steps like some wild thing, and rushed across the garden into the little wet wood.

CHAPTER XII

AREN'T YOU ALICE ?

IT was the afternoon of the next day.

All night long Edward Harding had been lying between life and death with two doctors never leaving him for a moment until the bullet had been successfully extracted ; and all night long Ariadne had hovered about the bedroom, either inside or out, with a look in her eyes that was like a dog's look when its master has been hurt and it can do nothing.

The wood had been searched from end to end, and the gardens, but no sign of any human being had been found.

In the morning telegrams were despatched to Lady Harding, Edward's mother, who was away convalescing at Cromer.

After a short time Lady Harding telegraphed back : " Leaving by the five train ; will be with you to-night. Wire me further details."

In the afternoon the maid brought a little tray to Ariadne in her boudoir, and tried to persuade her to eat something, for all day long she had touched nothing, the very sight of food making her ill. She poured herself out some tea and drank a few mouthfuls, but found herself incapable of swallowing the dainty sandwiches the maid so sympathetically offered.

A footman entered and announced that a gentleman

was below who wished to see Mrs. Harding on urgent business.

"He wouldn't give his name, madam," said the footman, "but he says it's very important."

The man hesitated a second.

Ariadne looked wearily at him. She was wearing a white muslin gown, in which she looked most pathetically slim and girlish, but her night's vigil showed in her face. She was haggard, and had dark shadows under her eyes.

"I don't think I can see any one," she said plaintively. "Didn't you tell him so, Thomas?"

"I told him, madam, that I thought you would be unable to receive him," said the man respectfully, "but he seemed a little wild, poor gentleman. He is very excited. May be he has come on some important business."

The thought occurred to Ariadne that perhaps here was something she could do for Edward, so she braced herself and went down the great staircase with a set look on her young face.

Over by the window in the morning-room a man was pausing.

He was evidently labouring under deep excitement. He had been pacing the room continuously ever since the footman had told him that the mistress would come down to him. He was a young man—twenty-five at the most. He was dressed in a light-grey suit of irreproachable cut, and quite clearly from his manner and air he was a soldier, but his smartness and correctness were all belied and contradicted by the expression of his face. His eyes were on fire with an unnatural light. He had obviously not shaved that morning.

His cheeks were hollow. There was such an air of wildness about him that Ariadne started back in alarm.

Next moment, with a quick stride, he had reached the door and closed it behind him, and stood facing her.

Speechlessly Ariadne stared at him.

Then with a sharp rush of memory she recognized him.

“ William ! ”

She ran to him, holding out her hands.

“ I didn't know you at first. When did you get back ? You're the last person in the world I should have dreamed of seeing. Oh, Billy, how good of you to come ! ”

“ Good ! ”

He echoed her word stupidly.

“ I thought perhaps you had heard,” she said. “ Something so dreadful has happened ! My husband was found shot in the wood last night. Oh, it's terrible—terrible ! The doctor says there's a—a doubt of his recovery. I thought perhaps Alice had sent you ! ”

Distressed as she was, she observed that her words had some strange effect on the young man before her. She saw him start, and stare at her with an added wildness in his eyes, and she began to be seriously alarmed.

She turned and moved towards the door, but his voice came crying after her, his tones grown hoarse, while he was trembling like a leaf as he gripped her by the arm, and looked wildly into her face.

“ . . . Alice sent me ? What do you mean ? Aren't you Alice ? ”

“ I—Alice ! I'm *Ariadne* ! ”

“ Ariadne ! ”

He stared at her dumbly, and she saw as in a dream the terror gathering in his look.

"Didn't you know? Do you mean to say that Alice has never told you that she hadn't married Edward Harding? I'm Ariadne, not Alice. I took her place so that she should be free for you. . . Billy, do you hear me? Speak! . . . Don't look at me like that! Hasn't Alice told you, poor old boy! And have you been thinking all this time that she married Edward?"

"I've not seen Alice. I've not seen her for four years. I've not heard a word from her since I left Aden. I heard of the marriage when I reached Aden. Then I was laid up with a bad bout of fever. I only arrived yesterday morning in London. And on the ship this thing met my eye. This!"

He drew a book from his pocket and with trembling fingers held towards her a newspaper cutting. It was from the *Morning Post* of a bygone date. She remembered the paragraph:

"Mr. Edward Harding and his bride, née Miss St. John, return to-day from the Continent and proceed to Harding Hall, Gloucestershire, where they intend to spend the best part of the summer."

"I read that!" he went on.

"Yes, you read that!" said Ariadne in a dry hard little voice. "And then—what then?"

"Then I went mad!"

He dropped into a chair suddenly, and leaning his arms on the table, let his head fall forward on them.

"Quite mad, quite mad!" he murmured hopelessly.

All round them stretched the beautiful morning-room, with its grey walls and floor, and black oak panellings. The sun came here in the morning, but now there was no sun ; the room looked eastward ; through the great windows glimpses of young green trees were seen. Out there in the garden the sunlight was beating down hotly, passionately, and the great yellow roses were drowsily nodding, and breathing out an ineffable perfume through the summer afternoon. The peace of the scene was indescribable. Both without and within there was something exquisite and harmonious that touched the girl's aesthetic sense even in a moment like this. She saw the desk by the window where she wrote her household memoranda—a great oak desk, luxuriously fitted with everything that could be desired. And under another window stretched a wide couch, covered with dim, charming chintz, and heaped with white silk cushions that seemed inviting her to lie and rest there.

“ Billy ? ”

Ariadne crossed the room and stood beside him. Bending over him she laid her hand on his arm.

He lifted his head at last and looked at her, and never as long as she lived would she forget the agony in his eyes.

“ Billy, dear old Billy ! Don't ! ” putting out her little white hands before her as if to ward off some awful blow.

“ Listen, Ariadne,” he said. “ You must know the truth. As a matter of fact I came here this afternoon to tell it to you ; came in my mad bravado to tell it to Alice, as I thought ! ”

“ Tell me ! ”

"When I read of Alice's marriage in the paper I was ill and weak and the one thing I wanted was to see her—just to see her face. Fever had affected my whole nervous system. I came down here by the evening train and put up at the village inn; they know me well there. I've been here many a time for the fishing. In fact the Innkeeper was once an old steward of my father's."

"Go on."

"I dined at the inn, or made a pretence of dining, then I strolled out for a walk before turning in. Once out of sight of the little village I went like mad by a short cut across the meadows and into the garden of Harding Hall—the house was all lit up. Suddenly a figure came gliding across the flower-beds. I saw her face—it seemed alive with happiness and radiant beauty. It was Alice—my Alice! whom I had cared for and worked for ever since I was a youngster. She passed me quite close. I shrank away and hid, uncertain as to my next move. Just then a man in evening dress, smoking a cigar and bareheaded, came down the steps of the house, and strolled through the garden, and into the wood on the left. I saw red. I seemed to go mad. I followed him. He was looking at a tree on which some initials were carved, and I fired. Then I left. I crept quickly out of the wood, and went back to the inn and was in bed a quarter of an hour afterwards. I fell at once into a heavy dreamless sleep, strange to say, and knew nothing more till the landlord called me this morning at nine o'clock. I breakfasted, and taking some lunch with me, spent the morning fishing at a stream a few miles off."

Ariadne was swaying, and he rushed to her side just

in time to get her gently into a chair. Her eyes closed for a moment. Then she recovered.

"Why did you come now ?" she gasped faintly.

"To tell you the truth—to give myself up, if necessary. I hadn't gone into the details. All I thought was of seeing Alice, and telling her I was the man who shot her husband. I was mad, you see, quite mad !"

With a superhuman effort Ariadne gathered herself together. It seemed to her that time was marching down on her like a battalion. Not a second was to be lost. Even now it might be too late. Any moment they might come and find him here. . . ."

"You must go, go !" she breathed. "Get out of the place as quickly as possible. For Alice's sake ! Get far away at once !"

Some one knocked at the door.

Ariadne opened it in an instant, and looked into the troubled face of the old housekeeper,

"The master has recovered consciousness and is asking for you, madam. The doctor says will you come at once."

Ariadne stared at her, and for a moment the world seemed to rock up and down.

"Yes, I understand," she said quietly. "I'm coming !"

She closed the door carefully, and went back to William Bellairs.

"Good-bye," she said bravely. "Remember that this shall be a secret as far as I am concerned. No one shall ever know the truth from me. I must go immediately ! Get away quickly—far away !"

They went into the hall together, and there they parted, Ariadne dragging herself up the great staircase to the darkened bedroom, and William walking quickly away down the cypress avenue towards the village.

After a few moments he turned aside, seeking a short cut through the meadows. His brain was on fire. The scene that he had just gone through seemed utterly unreal. Over and over again he said to himself, "It was Ariadne. It was *not* Alice!" But he could not convince himself of the truth. The agony of the day and night before had branded itself too strongly on his sick fever-haunted brain to be effaced in a moment; he still seemed to think that Alice had married some one else; the shadow of that seemed still to weigh upon him, just as it had weighed ever since that dreadful day at Aden when he had first heard the news about her marrying Edward Harding.

"So it was Ariadne who married him!"

He said the words aloud.

A vision of the man he had shot in the wood last night rose before him—a tall, broad-shouldered man in evening dress with a kindly face that no one in their senses could dislike—a manly man; even in his madness he had seen all that—quiet and even-tempered, one at peace with himself and the world.

Ariadne's words returned to him—flashing through the muddle of the dazed brain; he must get away for Alice's sake—he *mnst* get away.

For Alice's sake!

His foot caught in a long trail of wild convolvulus as he went stumbling along. . . . He tripped and fell heavily to the ground. A sharp pain made itself felt immediately in his ankle. He swore savagely under his breath and tried to rise. Then pain assailed him fiercely.

He fell back among the wet undergrowth again and lay there, helpless as a log.

CHAPTER XIII

“ MY WIFE ! ”

ARIADNE entered Edward's bedroom softly, trying to still the beating of her heart. . . She stood by the bedside and looked down. Edward seemed to have shrunken up in some strange, unaccountable way, yet his face against the whiteness of the pillow had an almost disconcerting brownness ; she had expected him to be ghastly and livid ; and here he was smiling at her, more wonderful still.

“ A nasty business,” he said, in low tones, that she had to bend over him to catch.

“ But you're better now ? ”

She seated herself on the edge of his bed. They were alone practically, the doctor having withdrawn to the far end of the room, while the nurse was in the dressing-room adjoining.

For a moment they remained so, gazing into each other's eyes.

“ Do you remember last night ? ” Edward said softly.

“ You mean when I found you in the wood ? ”

“ No, I mean before that ; when we were sitting on the sofa—when you put your hand on my arm ; do you remember ? ”

His voice was low and faint, but there was a strange cheerfulness in his face, worn and haggard though it was with suffering.

He put his hand out now in a feeble groping way,

feeling for Ariadne's as she knew by the almost beseeching smile on his lips. Bending over him she took his hand impulsively in both of her small white ones, holding it above and below in a close clasp, while her eyes looked half timidly, half mournfully into his, trying desperately to divine his thoughts.

"I remember everything," she whispered low.

"Alice was forgotten then," smiling still.

"Yes."

She could find nothing else to say.

The day was drawing to its twilight, and the shadows were lengthening in the long, silent bedroom. Away at the far end the doctor seemed like a spectre, and the trees that were to be seen through the windows took on an aspect of ghostliness and unreality, that seemed somehow to fit in strangely with the hush that had fallen over the great house.

"You must not talk," said Ariadne. "It is bad for you. You must get well—you *will* get well," looking at him imploringly, and doing her best to maintain a calm and gentle expression.

"Of course I'll get well," said Edward. His hand tightened over hers. "There's so much to live for, life is too wonderful; I'll pull through!"

His eyes sought hers, and in them was a dumb demand.

She read it, and, bending over him closer, she kissed him on the cheek. He raised his arm and let it drop round her neck, pressing her face against his for a moment, and she heard under his breath two whispered words, "My wife!"

It was only a moment that she rested there, but the moment seemed to her to possess two qualities.

It was eternal. Yet it was the swiftest moment she had ever known, and when she raised her head, and saw the great dim room stretching out around her, she was incapable of realizing who and where she was for a minute, so swift and far away had been the journey that her heart and soul had taken in that wonderful moment just gone by.

Then Edward's face changed, even while she was looking at him. Something terrifying came into his eyes, driving out the tenderness and content.

"Etienne, Etienne," . . . he murmured. . . .
 "Have you seen him? Did he get away? . . ."
 "Get away?"

Ariadne repeated the words stupidly.

"Pray God he got away!" muttered Edward, the feverish light increasing in his eyes, and his head moving restlessly on the pillow.

As Ariadne left the room, receiving the doctor's injunction to rest now, and hold herself in readiness to come whenever her husband asked for her, a strange idea flashed across her poor dazed brain, half-distracted under the weight of this anxiety.

Those words of Edward's returned and stung her.

"Etienne! Did he get away?"

What on earth had he meant by that?

And why had he added that ominously emphatic remark: "Pray God he got away!"

The girl turned white, and dropped into a big chair in the library adjoining Edward's bedroom, wondering if it was possible that Edward believed the man who shot him was Etienne? They had quarrelled yesterday, the cousins, quarrelled violently. She knew that. And she knew that Etienne had tried to borrow money

from Edward and had not succeeded, leaving the house after an angry scene between the two. He was young, Etienne. His blood was hot, and he was a Frenchman, more or less at the mercy of his passions. Was it surprising that Edward should suspect him?

Over and over again she turned the thought in her brain, every moment becoming more convinced that that was indeed what Edward had meant.

CHAPTER XIV

EDWARD'S MOTHER

SLOWLY, slowly Edward came creeping back to life, aided by a magnificent constitution and a vast desire to live.

A period of convalescence set in. Full summer chained the land now, and all those thwarted days of June and July, when the rain fell and the wind blew, and the sun was hid, were being atoned for by these cloudless, scent-laden August hours, with a blue sky stretching smilingly across the glittering world from dawn to dusk, the roses opening their ardent gold and crimson hearts to the sun, the bees humming ceaselessly among the flowers as they stole away their honey.

For three long weeks Lady Harding had been ensconced in the beautiful south suite of rooms that looked towards the river.

To Ariadne it seemed as if she had been there a lifetime, for always, day and night, the mother was at Edward's side, sweeping Ariadne aside with a superb disregard of the girl's claims, and recognizing no other right but her own to nurse this beloved son of hers.

All her own ailments, imaginary or otherwise, were laid away. One thought absorbed her ; that thought was Edward. She was like one possessed for the time being, and in a way this devotion of hers was a relief

to Ariadne, since it prevented the trying interrogations that she would otherwise have been subjected to from the elder woman, for in the excitement of the accident Lady Harding had shown a complete indifference to the fact that Edward had married Ariadne and not Alice.

She had eyes and ears for nothing but her son. She seemed to go back to his old nursery days, assuming control over him as though he were a little boy of seven. She was always tender to him, always smiling and considerate. She took the greatest care of her person too, dressing herself in fine white muslin frocks, so that the invalid should have a cool, fresh vision for his eyes to rest upon when she came near. She was large, tall and arrogant-looking, with a beaked nose and magnificent but astonishingly haughty eyes, that softened only for her son. She was very particular about the dressing of her hair, which was beautiful and snowy white, and her maid had to take as much trouble with her as if she were some beautiful young creature in her twenties.

And all for Edward! It was touching to see the efforts she made not to look tired or old in his eyes, She would sit for hours at a time at his bedside, knitting or reading, or dozing over her work, while the bees buzzed drowsily in the great flower-filled gardens beyond the open window of the bedroom, and when she was obliged to leave him for a little while she would shut herself up in her own rooms and rest, so that she could come back to him all the fresher.

She was a woman who either could or would do only one thing at a time, and the thing that she was doing now was taking care of her son; but all the while, put carefully away in the background of her mind, were

various stern facts which she intended to face presently, when the right moment arrived.

First of all, there was the question of the unknown assailant in the wood.

The night of her arrival Edward had said to her, in the intervals of delirium, "Keep the police out of it!"

And afterwards, time and again, he had repeated the same thing to her. She was bewildered. She was displeased. But, seeing that it was Edward's wish, she set herself to carry it out, exercising all her dignity and authority.

She had a strange, brief interview with Ariadne, and then with the housekeeper and servants, and finally with the police themselves, the upshot of which was, that all inquiries ceased. No further search was made.

At first Edward accepted unquestioningly his mother's presence, being really too ill to think much about anything. He suffered a good deal, and his temperature was alarming often. In pain and fever, quietude was all he craved for.

The large, calm image of his mother, with her beautifully-braided white hair, sitting by his bedside, in her fine white muslin gowns, seemed to steal soothingly over his senses.

But by and by he began to look for some one else! His eyes used to wander to the door when he heard it opening, and then, seeing his mother enter, a little flame of disappointment would shoot up, to be quickly hidden the next moment, as the mother bent over him so tenderly, so caressingly, inquiring in her deep, pitying voice how he felt, and if there was anything she could do for him.

It was seldom indeed that Ariadne found him alone.

Always the mother was with him, or the nurse, or the doctors.

And though it would have seemed quite natural that she should draw a chair to his bedside and ensconce herself there, timidity restrained her.

Shy and nervous, she would stand for a few moments beside him, feeling all the time that she had no right to be there, and stealing away presently as the elder woman swept the field with the calm assurance of a general.

One morning Edward woke in a state of acute irritability that increased as the hours went by. One o'clock came ; and his lunch was brought in. He stared past the footman, a blank look of disappointment in his eyes that slowly changed to anger.

He turned to his mother.

"Where is Ariadne ? " he asked abruptly.

"Haven't you seen her this morning ? "

"Only for a moment. She came in about nine o'clock, but she went away when you arrived—don't you remember ? Why does she never come and sit with me ? Surely she must know how long and dreary the hours are for one who is lying here alone ! "

"Alone ? "

Lady Harding's face clouded over suddenly.

"But, Edward dear, you are never alone," she said suavely. "I am always with you, and if I am not here, nurse is."

"Yes, but Ariadne isn't," muttered Edward. "She only comes in for about two minutes at a time. She just stands there at the bottom of my bed, and asks me how I am, and says it's a beautiful day, or something of that sort, and that she hopes that I'm better,

and that I look better, and then you come in, or the nurse, and she slips away."

Lady Harding drew herself up with an air of dignity befitting the widow of a worthy Knight, who had benefited His Majesty's hospitals to such an extent that he had been able to leave his dear Emily the pleasant title of "My Lady."

"Nothing is so annoying to an invalid as a visitor who stands at the bottom of the bed," she said. "I've noticed it myself. Ariadne ought to know better."

The nurse and a footman were setting out a dainty lunch on a little table, but Edward upset them all by remarking that he couldn't eat anything.

"All I want is to sleep!"

His mother bent over him, her eyes full of concern, but he turned away from her like a cross child, reiterating that all he wanted was to be left alone.

So nurse and footman and mother tiptoed noiselessly out of the room, carrying away as quickly as possible the rejected little lunch in all its daintiness.

"This is Ariadne's fault," Lady Harding said to herself, as she descended the stairs to lunch in the dining-hall.

It was several minutes before the young mistress of the house appeared, and then she came in flushed and breathing quickly as though she had hurried.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she murmured. "I—I couldn't get back."

"My dear Ariadne, what *do* you do with yourself all the morning? Where do you disappear to?"

Lady Harding fixed those cold grey eyes of hers sternly on the girl's face.

To her amazement a sudden tide of scarlet swept

up, dyeing even the little fair forehead. A quiver passed over Ariadne's lips, and something desperate and frightened went flitting across eyes and brow. Her eyelids drooped. She looked the very picture of dismay and fear.

"What on earth is the matter, child?"

"Nothing."

"Why are you looking so frightened? The reason why I questioned you was simply this: Edward is disturbed by your behaviour."

"Edward! My behaviour!" gasped Ariadne.

"Your behaviour," repeated Lady Harding firmly.

"What have I done?"

The frightened look intensified itself in those lovely eyes, turned so appealingly towards the older woman's cold, impassive face.

"You've shown a most lamentable ignorance of how to treat an invalid," said Lady Harding in large sepulchral tones, as though addressing a crowd of girls.

"No well brought-up young woman should stand fidgeting at the bottom of a sick person's bed, instead of seating herself calmly and quietly on a chair close to the bedside, talking gently for a few moments in an even voice about something calculated not to disturb the patient in the very least, but to please and soothe instead, and then without the slightest air of hurry, or suggestion of having other things more important to do, stealing nicely away, with a little smile, and repeating the visit at a not-too-lengthy interval, so that the patient could have no possible grounds for considering himself neglected!"

She paused for breath after her long tirade, and drank off a glass of iced water and lemon juice.

"I'm very sorry," said a trembling voice.

"My dear Ariadne, being sorry is scarcely a method of mending one's wrong-doing. I do trust that you will behave a little differently to my poor son."

Ariadne was silent.

"You must remember that, if you will pardon me for saying so, the eyes of a household are upon you, the eyes of a household are always upon us all, and we must never forget to play our parts with niceness and decorum. As a wife, you should certainly come and sit with Edward four or five minutes every morning and the same every afternoon."

For a moment Ariadne felt quite hysterical.

It seemed to her that nothing more tragically comic than that discourse had ever been uttered.

Here was this woman, who had so calmly ousted her from her place at Edward's side, where her heart had been yearning and crying all this time to be—here was this very woman lecturing her on her delinquencies, and exhorting her to spend four or five minutes every morning and afternoon with Edward!

"Four or five minutes!"

The irony of it pierced poor Ariadne so sharply that she found herself utterly incapable of replying.

For her, four or five minutes!

But for Lady Harding hours at a time!

Ariadne bent her head over her plate and made an attempt at eating some cold chicken, but the food seemed to choke her. She could scarcely swallow. Only by a great effort of will was she able to sit quietly there and continue her pretence at lunch.

"But where do you go all the morning?" said Lady Harding, returning to the charge, having appar-

ently further soured and sharpened herself with the iced water and lemon juice. "You disappear! Where do you disappear to?"

"I have things to do," said Ariadne.

"They are not things in the house! Yesterday morning and this morning, both the maids came to me to ask if I knew where you were. Doubtless they had some trifling household queries to put. The mistress of a well-ordered house is usually to be found by her domestics in the forenoon."

"I had to go out."

"But when I asked you to match my wool in the village you said you were not going there! You quite clearly stated that you were not going to the village this morning!"

"No."

"How do you mean 'No'?" went on the pitiless interlocutor. "Do you mean 'No' you went, or 'No' you didn't go?"

"I didn't go to the village this morning," was the low reply.

Lady Harding put up her pince-nez and favoured Ariadne with a long, deliberate stare. She was too dignified a person to allow her feelings to get the better of her, but she was certainly becoming aroused and annoyed over Ariadne's strange manner.

But before she had a chance to put further questions Ariadne rose abruptly from the table, saying in a quick propitiatory way, with an evident effort to keep the peace between herself and her mother-in-law—

"I think I will go up and see Edward now."

"He is asleep. He wishes to be left alone," said Lady Harding.

Ariadne stood tall and dumb before her, gowned in a simple white frock, with her rich beautiful hair braided in one long thick plait round her dainty head. Her face was pale and there were dark shadows under her eyes, but never had she looked more lovely—she was so girlish and winning, with that plaintive sweetness in her face, that it was a wonder how any one could have looked at her with cold impassive glance.

Perhaps Lady Harding was touched a little by the piteous expression flitting over the fair young face, for she added quickly in a kinder voice—

“Well, perhaps you had better go to him. After all, he was asking for you this morning and he may not be asleep. Certainly it would be rather hard on a man if his own wife does not care to visit him when he is laid on a bed of pain and suffering. Yes, I think you had better go.”

They passed out of the dining-room together.

In the hall they were arrested by the loud clanging of the front door bell, and next moment Etienne Bouleran was hurrying towards them.

* * * *

“Cousin Ariadne! Oh, how grieved I am to hear of this terrible thing that has happened to my poor cousin Edward! I have been away. I only returned this morning from London, and heard of it for the first time at the Laurels, where I am again making a brief visit to my good friend Mrs. Allistone. I came at once. Is there anything I can do for you? Command me. I am yours. You understand that, don't you? In your trouble you may be glad to have a man about, and who more suitable than I, your cousin Etienne? If there is anything I can do, I beg you, I

pray you, make use of me. It would be such an honour, such a pleasure ! ”

Lady Harding, standing petrified in the background, was completely ignored.

She stood drawn up at the bottom of the stairs—a tall majestic figure in white, with white hair, and an expression of freezing disapproval stamped upon her whole person.

Neither Ariadne nor Etienne took the slightest notice of her.

They had forgotten her, as a matter of fact. They were young and capable of occasional lapses from the strict observances of society, and for the moment they lost sight of everything but each other ; for in Ariadne’s mind was a certain dreadful suspicion of Edward’s, agitating and overwhelming her a thousandfold now that Etienne was here before her ; and as for Etienne, he had eyes for no one but this tall fair girl-wife of his cousin Edward’s, whose grace and beauty pleased his artistic temperament, while the naïve childishness of her disposition and her kindness and frankness and gaiety drew him to her irresistibly.

“ How is Edward to-day ? ” he asked eagerly.

“ He’s getting better ; he’s out of danger ; the worst is over.”

Ariadne looked very white.

“ And who did it ? ” cried Etienne. “ Who could have played such a cruel trick on my poor cousin while he was so happy ? ”

“ They have discovered nothing.” Ariadne’s eyelids fell over her eyes ; her fear might be read there if he looked in them.

“ Edward and I quarrelled,” went on Etienne.

"For that I am sorry. But really, Cousin Ariadne, he was a little hard on me." Then, bethinking himself that they were standing there in the open hall, he dropped his voice, and said in low, impressive tones—"Could I talk with you alone, Cousin, for a little?"

She nodded, and without a word, led the way to her boudoir.

The hall was deserted save for that tall, white figure at the bottom of the staircase, whose presence had been completely overlooked, and with quite an unmistakable toss of her head, Lady Harding began to mount the stairs towards Edward's room.

He was awake and sitting propped up among his pillows. He looked better than his mother had seen him for a long time but her quick eye observed the eager expression that came into his face as she entered, and then the disappointment that followed next moment.

"Ariadne is engaged downstairs," she said coming over to the side of his bed, and looking about her with the suave unhurried graciousness that she considered soothing in an invalid's room.

"Engaged? Whom is she engaged with?"

Lady Harding seated herself slowly in the big chair, and proceeded to draw some knitting from the voluminous bag of mauve silk which she carried on her arm.

"She is with Etienne," she answered quietly.

"*Etienne!*"

"Yes, my dear Edward, with Etienne. The boy, it seems, has just ridden over to inquire after you. Ariadne appears to regard him with greater favour than I can ever bring myself to show him. But then,

she knows so much less of him than we do. They have gone off together to her boudoir to have a private talk. I heard Etienne asking if he could talk to her alone, and Ariadne acquiesced." As she knew this would not be particularly pleasing information to her beloved invalid, she added, a little reluctantly, "Ariadne was just about to come up to see you when Etienne arrived."

"Indeed! It was very good of her." The undisguised irritation in voice only partly betrayed the real state of his feelings.

Lady Harding knitted for a moment, and then, summoning what she considered to be her tact, but was in reality the most curiously blundersome apology for the same, she added—

"I spoke to Ariadne at lunch, Edward. I took it upon myself as your mother to tell her I thought she was being a little neglectful."

"Why, mother!" Edward favoured her with an angry stare. "Surely you did not put it like that to Ariadne!"

"But why not? Certainly I did."

"I can scarcely believe it of you, mother!" sharply. "A man doesn't want any one to say things like that to his wife. It was my place, if any one's, to make such a remark. I distinctly do not think it was your place."

It was one thing to feel in his heart a little soreness against this wife of his, who paid him such curt visits, and it was another to have a third person entering into the matter and passing judgment on Ariadne.

Edward's delicacy rose in revolt against the idea of any one attempting to tell Ariadne how she ought to treat him. It was odious. It was impossible.

He pictured the girl's feelings at being upbraided by her mother-in-law, especially if she knew that he had complained. Then his mother's voice came to him.

"So they're down in the boudoir now—she and Etienne. It is quite evident that she does not intend to hurry herself in spite of my extremely gentle reminder of her duty. But there, they are both young, she and Etienne, both mere children in fact. What can one expect? We mustn't be too hard on them."

This was Lady Harding's idea of being tactful.

She saw herself in the light of pouring oil on troubled waters and gently smoothing out these little disturbances between husband and wife.

Not even the blank look on Edward's face, nor the quick way in which he reached for a cigarette and lit it feverishly, nor the long protracted silence which followed her speech, warned her how she was blundering.

Sweetly she sowed her seed. It fell into the furrows of a sick man's brain. All in a moment life came springing into it, and it was shooting steadily, mercifully, upwards, seeking for a larger and larger growth even while the sun shone gaily outside the window in the great flower-filled garden, and all the larks and thrushes in the world seemed to be singing their hearts out for sheer joy of the summer weather.

After that Lady Harding watered her seed gently with another of her tactful little speeches.

"Ariadne has evidently much to say to Etienne!"

Silence from Edward.

But for the moment he came as near criticizing his mother as was possible to a man of his temperament and innate filial devotion

There was an unmistakable air of satisfaction about her that almost amounted to self-righteousness. It seemed to be saying: "Look at me, how I do my duty! Look at Ariadne, how she fails in hers!"

Edward lit another cigarette.

"Pshaw!" he said under his breath. And with a determined effort of will he tried to turn his thoughts into another channel, when a fresh remark from his mother fell on his ears.

"I can't make out where Ariadne disappears to every morning. I have asked her, and she seems a little evasive, almost as if she had some secret to conceal. She is often missing when the servants want her. This morning she was late for lunch, and yesterday she was away for quite the best part of the morning, and the same the day before. I asked her to buy some wool for me in the village, and she said she was not going there. Where is it that she goes, Edward? You, of course, will know?"

"Mother, I want to go to sleep!" said Edward almost roughly. "Would you mind leaving me alone?"

CHAPTER XV

LALLIE AT HOME

ETIENNE was at the Laurels again, where a lively house-party was enjoying Mrs. Allistone's extremely unconventional hospitality.

Every one was expected to be lighthearted and entertaining at the Laurels, and all day long the small house with its neat, beautifully kept gardens, rang with gay laughter as Lallie and her visitors played every kind of game imaginable—tennis, croquet, battle-dore-and-shuttlecock, charades, private theatricals, dances—while always and for ever bridge went on, like a perpetual accompaniment to all their other songs.

One morning while Mrs. Allistone was opening her letters and drinking her morning chocolate, a sharp exclamation fell from her lips, and after reading her letters through twice, she lay back among her pillows, looking very handsome in her pale pink matinée, with a dainty background of fine lace-draped curtains.

Marthe, the maid, was moving about the room, preparing her mistress's bath, and Mrs. Allistone now called to her loudly.

Marthe was perhaps the one person in all the world whom Lallie Allistone absolutely believed in.

"Marthe, you know that I'm frightfully hard up, don't you? I have no secrets from you. You know how I'm being pressed, and dunned and worried.

You know that this, and this, and this"—picking up one letter after another and tossing it contemptuously to the floor as she spoke—"are from horrid people who are pressing me, and demanding that I pay them the most ridiculous sums which, between ourselves, I haven't the slightest intention of paying now or ever."

Her white fingers, glittering with jewels, seized another batch of letters and flung them far and wide across the rosepink carpet, while an insouciant laugh broke from those curving scarlet lips, as she cried recklessly:

"And that!—and that!—and *that*!—all letters cringing for money which the writers will not see for many a day. How vulgar they are—these people who want to be paid! They never seem to realize that one must take one's own time."

She paused for breath.

Marthe stood by, stolidly waiting for the significance of this diatribe.

"But the nuisance of it is, Marthe, I want some new frocks—I must have some, in fact. Absolutely, I'm in rags. At least, that is to say, I must have a couple of new tea-gowns within the next few days—at least three hats, a riding habit, and a couple of dinner gowns. I must have them, Marthe, I really *must*!"

"Yes, madame," said Marthe submissively.

"But where am I going to get them?" said Mrs. Allistone, stretching her white hand for the silver case that stood on the little Morocco table at her side, and languidly lighting herself a fragrant Russian cigarette. "It's beastly being poor!" she said.

She lay back and drew a few long contented breaths

at the cigarette, puffing the smoke out delicately and watching its course with those great black eyes of hers, full of shadows and subdued brilliancy, with strange red lights burning in the heart of their blackness.

"This letter is from a cousin of mine," she added, tapping the envelope near her—"Ethelwynne Smith; enormously rich, Marthe, but a freak. She has a great house in Grosvenor Street, but she won't have carpets on the floor—nothing but little bits of white flannel, tacked on for her dog's feet. She's so mean, and hates spending money so, that she simply gets richer and richer. Goodness knows what will be the end of her. I hate her! I hate all ugly people—and she has a face like a pumpkin, a nose like a carrot, and the manner of a washerwoman. It's a positive pain to me to look at her. And yet it's awfully indiscreet of me not to, considering what she might do for me if she chose."

"And what is it she has written?" asked Marthe.

Mrs. Allistone opened the letter and read aloud—

"MY DEAR LALLIE,—

"I think I remember you telling me that you had an empty cottage that you had not been able to let, and it has occurred to me that (if not too expensive) I should like to take it, as I understand it is very old and picturesque, with quaint oak panelling and a thatched roof.

"I am willing to offer you £40 a year for the same, and I would bring down some nice old furniture and make the place a pleasant little resort when I wish to escape into the country. I have a predilection for a small house. It is so much less expensive.

"I suppose one could manage quite well with one servant in this cottage of yours, especially as I am a vegetarian and subsist largely on lentils, nuts and fruit, which are so much more sustaining and also digestible, and leave one free to carry out one's responsibilities more quickly and effectively.

"I should bring down with me a very dear friend, who has been taking an active part in the Women's Suffrage movement.

"Are the sanitary arrangements quite all they should be? Is there a bath? What kind of range is there in the kitchen? Are there plenty of wholesome vegetables in the garden?

"Is the drinking water of the best? How far is the nearest church, and also the post-office?

"I understand that there are no neighbours.

"Kindly let me have a reply by return, and I will come down and see the cottage for myself, as I should like to take it immediately; September and October are such delightful months."

Mrs. Allistone looked at Marthe with significant eyes when she had finished reading.

"It isn't the forty pounds a year I'm thinking of," she said slowly, with a slight smile hovering about those scarlet lips of hers—"it's the fact of having my dear Ethelwynne within reach. If I can only play my part well—make myself indispensable to her—now's my chance. Do you see what I mean, Marthe?"

"Yes, madame."

"It's rather a good idea, isn't it, Marthe?" with that light, high, thrilling laugh of hers, that some

people found strangely seductive, though others—like Edward Harding for instance—simply shuddered when they heard it.

Springing up, she began to move about her room, her long black hair hanging in a heavy plait far past her knees.

“I’m going to hurry and dress and go down to the cottage,” she announced. “I’ll go alone. It’s months since I’ve been near it, and there’s nobody there but the old caretaker. Come, Marthe, my scent, my bath powder! I declare I feel a new pulse of life rushing through me at the thought of Ethelwynne and her half a million secreting themselves in a cottage belonging to poor humble little me!”

She rushed about, full of vitality and excitement, pulling out things from her drawers and tossing them hither and thither recklessly—laces, blouses, muslin frocks, ribbons, veils—till her room was strewn.

Her eyes shone with the delightful thoughts she was indulging in and as she dressed herself she chatted away to Marthe of how one tea-gown should be a vivid green, to throw up the blackness of her hair and the whiteness of her skin; and the other should be pure, innocent-looking white, with nothing to relieve it but a silver girdle.

Her spirits had risen like mercury. All her troubles vanished.

It was quite characteristic of Lallie Allistone that she should have forgotten all those other odious dunning letters, and thrown herself wholly with feather-brained inconsequence into this new scheme of letting her cottage to Ethelwynne.

At eleven o’clock she was ready, looking charming in a

Paris gown of creamy lace, with a broad hat encircled simply with a pale gold-coloured scarf that threw up those splendid eyes of hers.

Her visitors all went their own way in the morning, amusing themselves just as they liked.

For a moment she thought of taking Etienne with her; then she decided against it. She could go into the details of the range, the bath, and the other things so much more quickly and easily if she were alone. Humming a light song, and swinging her parasol airily, she set out through a path in the woods to the cottage.

CHAPTER XVI

"CHECKMATE"

OUTSIDE the windows a low, sweet wind was wandering, stealing away the fragrance of the roses and lilies, and breathing it in through the open window.

A vision in a cream-coloured frock and big cream hat came slowly down the dense choked garden in front of the cottage.

Lallie looked about her with searching eye, thinking hard all the while how the cottage would impress her cousin.

Suddenly voices reached her.

She was about to move round towards the back of the cottage but at the sound she paused and came to a standstill.

Then she made her way to the back door, which was closed. She rapped sharply with her parasol.

There was no reply.

"This is a funny thing," she said to herself. "I could have sworn I heard a woman's voice in there."

She rapped again, more loudly than ever, a frown appearing on her dark, handsome face.

"Open the door!" she cried peremptorily.

She could hear some one moving about within.

She was sure she was not mistaken.

She listened intently. She scarcely breathed, so eager

was she in her increasing curiosity and excitement. There were people inside, and she would, she must, find out who they were.

She was angry now, and her eyes began to flash, for she was a woman who would not brook the slightest opposition to her will, as those who were acquainted with her knew to their cost.

Raising her parasol she banged at the door.

"If you don't open immediately, I shall go for the police!" she cried boldly. "I know perfectly well there is some one inside. I am Mrs. Allistone, the owner of this house, and I demand that the doors be opened to me."

And then the door was opened.

Mrs. Allistone gasped and drew back, scarcely believing her own eyes. Before her stood a tall, slight girl, in a light gown, with an apron round her waist. A white face, two great grey eyes, a halo of beautiful warm-coloured hair, a perfect profile, a small classic head, held high even in this moment of distress. It was Edward Harding's wife!

CHAPTER XVII

ARIADNE'S SECRET

"**I** AM so sorry!" stammered Ariadne. "I hope you will excuse me. I am just going back to the Hall now. Will you walk with me?"

Her manner was so flurried and agitated that the sophisticated elder woman knew in a moment that young Mrs. Harding was hiding something.

"I want to come in and see my cottage," said Lallie airily. "Then I shall be delighted to walk with you. But I must give a look round here first. The place is going to be let. It has been empty for the last two months, but I believe I've got a jolly tenant at last. A rich old cousin of mine is after it. I've just come to look things over a bit."

Ariadne barred the doorway.

She was thinking desperately, wildly.

But think as she would she could see no way of hiding what she wanted hidden from those searching prying eyes of Lallie's.

"Must you come in?" she exclaimed feverishly.

"Why, my dear child! What on earth's the matter? And what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I didn't know this was your cottage—it was empty. It hadn't been let for years. I never dreamt it belonged to you!"

"But there's no one here but old Sawkins. Surely

you have not played hospital nurse for old Sawkins ! I didn't know he was ill."

Just then Sawkins himself appeared in the garden, his round red cheeks looking the picture of health, while a bundle of bread and a can of milk were to be seen in his hands.

"I'm going inside," said Mrs. Allistone. "I'm hot. I'm tired. And you, you're white and trembling like a leaf. Good Heavens, what does it all mean?"

She grasped Ariadne by the arm and half led half drew her into the cottage.

For a moment Mrs. Allistone stared blankly.

Her lips parted, her eyes were large and wondering. Then she laughed.

She put a hand on Ariadne's arm, and in her low mischievous voice said as she regained the garden :

"My dear, I'm so sorry I intruded!"

She threw back her head and an expression of irresistible amusement passed over her dark, handsome face; her white teeth gleamed behind the scarlet lips; the black eyes were full of restrained delight.

Ariadne remained perfectly quiet, though her face was white.

Suddenly she put her hands out impulsively and laid them on Lallie Allistone's shoulders, her grey eyes, all truth and sincerity, looking earnestly into the depths of the other woman's flashing orbs.

"You're a woman," she said softly. "And you've found me out!"

Mrs. Allistone laughed.

"Not the first time," she said gaily, "that I've found another woman out."

"I don't know what you mean by that," said

Ariadne gravely. "But oh, Mrs. Allistone, I'm sure you've got a kind heart. Etienne, Edward's cousin, thinks so much of you. He has told me how dear and sweet you are, how kind and generous. I'm sure I can trust you. And I'm going to do so. I'm going to ask you to keep that matter secret."

She paused and gasped a little, overcome by the intense seriousness of the situation.

"It means life and death almost, to me," she said, "and no one knows about this. It would be dreadful if it ever became public. Oh, Mrs. Allistone! Do promise me you will never speak of it."

Mrs. Allistone laughed again.

"Why my dear, my dear!" she said, "of *course* I'll be dumb and mute! I never was a prattler. Believe me, I've never given any one away yet, and I'm not likely to begin with you. I quite understand. Of course, I can't help saying"—with a mischievous laugh—"that I'm just the *least* bit surprised, for, after all, you're only a bride, and brides don't generally indulge in secrets of this kind from husbands like Edward Harding. But it's all right, my dear—trust me, I'll keep your secret, I promise you I will. On the other hand, I feel sure that if you can do me any little service you will"—her quick mind grasping in a second the possibilities that she might make out of all this.

Tears stood in Ariadne's eyes.

"I'd do anything in the world for you," she cried—"anything! All I hope is that I may have the chance of proving that I mean what I say. I'll never forget your kindness, your tact, never—never. I'd do anything for you, indeed I would!"

Mrs. Allistone patted her softly on the shoulder.

"That's all right," she said brightly. "My dear, I'll take you at your word sooner than you think. In the meantime, I'll keep your secret, I promise you."

CHAPTER XVIII

EDWARD LOOKS STRAIGHT INTO THINGS

IT was the hour after lunch and Edward Harding was alone in the library, stretched out in luxurious ease on the low divan, covered with a huge tiger skin, that was placed directly under the westerly window. All around were books, lining the walls from floor to ceiling, and breathing into the atmosphere that indescribable sense of peace that books know the secret of so subtly. Great elm trees moved gently in the tender breeze stirring along the garden; the sleepy coo of wood-pigeons came drowsily through the room; overhead glittered the perfect turquoise of a summer sky that had no cloud on it from end to end. Anything more utterly soothing and harmonious than the dreamy hour in the beautiful surroundings of the library and the gardens without could scarcely be imagined, and yet there was no content in Edward's face. He was the master of all this, but his expression just now was dissatisfied and restless.

To us all there comes the hour when, if we are wise, we no longer shrink back nervously from the shadow of a trouble, but march boldly up to it, seeking to discover what may be its nature; is it shadow, and only shadow? is it simply some distorted wraith of a highly strung imagination? is it the outcome of some cerebral disturbance, such as overwork or lack

of sleep, or a strike among the digestive organs, or a too circumscribed line of thought? Is it simply filmy, evanescent, something that rises as swiftly as the white foam on the sea and as swiftly breaks and falls again, creeping back into the great ocean of life with a soft serene movement? Or is it different from all this, the haunting shadow, and has it indeed a reality?

Edward was facing his shadow. It had begun to haunt him persistently, day after day, hour after hour, and always he had turned aside from it, and bid it get behind him. He had tried to shake it out of his existence; he had called himself a thousand and one reproachful names; he was overstrung; he was senile and jealous, and unbalanced. But calling himself names seemed to have no permanent effect upon the shadow, which returned to haunt him more and more obstinately as the days went on.

He was forty that very week, and his common sense told him that a man of those years takes a love affair even more intensely than a hot-headed boy of twenty. He had seen it among the men he knew over and over again. They were more irrational than the most fervent youths. And particularly susceptible were they to the cruel pricks of jealousy and envy.

The door opened slowly, and Ariadne came in.

"Etienne is here," she said. "He wishes to see you."

She paused in the doorway, a slender pleading figure, and looked timidly at her husband.

"Won't you come over here," said Edward gently. "Let Etienne wait a bit. I want to talk to you. My mother is asleep. I am all alone. I didn't know Etienne was here."

He was trying to conquer the little demon that all in an instant had began its insidious attack again.

More gently still he added :

" Couldn't you sit in this big chair beside me for a little while ? I want to talk to you."

She hesitated.

" Won't it seem a little rude to—to Etienne ? " she said in a low voice. " I told him I would ask if you would see him."

Edward endured another moment of secret but intense mental combat.

Again he came off victor.

" Dear child," he said in a quiet, unhurried voice, " Etienne knows as well as you that I am not quite up to the mark yet. Of course I appreciate his courtesy in coming so frequently to inquire after me, but truly I don't think I am equal to him. What I would really like would be for you to sit down in that big chair and leave the boy to his own devices for a bit while I discuss two or three things with you."

He leant forward eagerly, his eyes on her face.

" I've been wondering if you'd like to have the Curt-Bird and Fat Girl here for a little visit ? You must miss them all frightfully. To come away from a big family to the silence and solitude of the Hall, especially under its present circumstances—me disabled and useless, and anything but a lively companion, and my poor mother rather given over to anxiety—must be awfully trying for you, Ariadne, and I'm not such a selfish brute as not to realize it."

As he was speaking he saw how nervously Ariadne's slender white hands were clasping and unclasping themselves, and he realized, with a pang, that she did

not seat herself in the big armchair in spite of his invitation.

"You are very good," she murmured.

She was pale and nervous. Edward looking at her, felt suddenly frightened. He saw clearly how different she was from the Ariadne who had gone with him to Italy. This face seemed to have lost its capacity for joy, and there was an almost hunted look in the eyes, instead of that old gay girlish brightness.

"My dear child, are you ill?" he cried quickly.

He dragged himself somewhat stiffly to his feet, and made a movement to come towards her.

"I oughtn't to walk," he said quietly, "but if you persist in standing away over there and talking to me with half the room between us, you force me to disobey the doctor's orders."

She put her hands out with a frightened gesture, and hastened towards him.

"I will sit down for a few minutes," she said feverishly. "But oh don't, please don't, do anything so rash as to try and walk when the doctor has forbidden you to do so!"

"Very well."

Edward let himself down again on the tiger skin, and leaned his head back with a tired movement against the cushions.

A silence fell over them—an awkward, uncomfortable silence,—in which Edward was making a desperate effort to recover from the strain this scene was undoubtedly putting upon him, while Ariadne, white and troubled, was thinking partly of Edward and partly of Etienne, who was waiting for her all this time in the music-room.

She only hoped that he would amuse himself with her violin, which he played so uncommonly well.

"Ariadne!"

"Yes."

She leaned forward eagerly.

"These cushions are so beastly uncomfortable. They want punching or something. I wish you'd fix them up for me."

She was on her feet in a moment, and bending over him, softly adjusted the recalcitrant cushions. Edward smiled to himself. He had caught her now, he thought, giving way to a sort of schoolboy impulse, that made him forget like magic those forty years that had been troubling him so much. Mute and motionless he lay as she hovered about him, but he was conscious in every fibre of his being of her nearness, and the sense of happiness that possessed him was almost frightening.

"Is that better now?"

"Yes, that's splendid. Nobody can fix things up like you."

He smiled up at her as she stood looking down at him, and suddenly his hand went out and gently enfolded her little white wrist.

"Sit on the edge of my sofa, for a moment," he said pleadingly. "That armchair is such a very long way off."

As he spoke he gently drew her down till she was seated beside him. His hand still encircled her wrist, and she made no movement to draw it away.

"What have you been doing with yourself all the morning?" he asked softly, tenderness creeping unbidden into his voice.

She was looking down at that moment, her eyelashes

quivering black against the clear pallor of her cheeks.

She looked up sharply. He felt her start. Then a tide of red came slowly up into her face.

"I went out," she said quickly. "I had something to do."

"Where did you go?"

The question escaped his lips in spite of himself, seemingly forced from him by that strange blush that was dyeing her cheeks so cruelly, right under his eyes.

"I had to go out," she said quickly. "It was nothing. Did you want me? I'm sorry if there was anything I could have done for you—" stumbling over the words in her feverish eagerness to draw his thoughts away from that tell-tale scarlet blush.

"I always want you," he answered.

But the words seemed to fall mechanically from him, and his shocked glance was unable to detach itself from her shrinking, burning face. Suddenly the demon of jealousy attacked him.

"Ariadne," he said quickly, "do you go for walks with Etienne in the morning? Is that why you are so mysterious and disappear without letting any one know when you are going and where? Listen to me! I can't bear to have a mystery like this growing up between us. It's too dangerous—it's too, too——" He hesitated for a word, and could not find one. "It's better to speak out frankly," he said. "Perhaps you've seen that I don't care for or approve of Etienne, and perhaps that is why you meet him without letting me know."

"Meet Etienne!"

She looked at him bewildered.

"I didn't mean to speak of this," said Edward, "but

quite by accident this morning Sir James O'Dowell happened to mention that he had seen you at the station with a young man. It was Etienne, of course. I guessed that."

She sat dumb.

"Well," he went on, gradually regaining his self-control, "don't think me hard and unjust towards the boy, but I can't—I simply can't approve of him, and that's the truth of it. He's done two or three things that I don't consider are altogether straight. Perhaps not so bad as that," he said, struggling again to maintain an even balance. "But, anyway, the long and the short of it is that I don't intend to countenance Etienne until he turns over a new leaf."

Ariadne's voice trembled, but she forced herself to speak.

"Don't you think that perhaps you're a little bit hard on him?"

"I'm not hard on him," said Edward, "I'm thinking of his own good. You think me hard and unjust, Ariadne—very likely you do, but nobody would be more delighted than I if Etienne would buck up and make himself into a man. Besides, I don't approve of"—he hesitated—"of various things," he ended vaguely, suddenly considering it was not safe to allow himself to say too much.

"He's an orphan. He has such a good heart."

She raised her eyelids and looked up into Edward's eyes.

She knew perfectly well what it was that lay hidden in the background of her husband's mind. He suspected Etienne of that dreadful thing. And she—she, only too well, was aware that Etienne was innocent.

Now she saw the flame of anger gathering in those blue eyes, and unconsciously she shrank away a little.

But Edward held her firmly.

"I don't want Etienne to come here any more," he said. "After all, it is my house, and I have a perfect right to ask him to allow me to dispense with the pleasure of his company."

"Oh no, no! You wouldn't do that!" in dismay.

"I don't know! I think it would be the best thing I could do. Listen, Ariadne, I didn't mean to speak of this! I have never spoken of it to a living soul yet," quite unconscious of the words that had dropped from him on the night of the accident. "You know that some one tried to pot me in the wood that night? Well I've no enemies—I can't think of a single person who had a grudge against me to that extent, except——"

He paused.

"Except Etienne," he added firmly.

There they were, so close to each other, husband and wife, that they could almost hear each other's hearts beating. But, alas! in that moment there opened out between them a space, black and still, that stretched itself with cruel and relentless intensity, growing wider and more chill and bleak every moment.

Ariadne's face had gone paler, and a look of unutterable misery come into those sweet eyes of hers.

"Oh no, no! It is terrible! You're wrong. You are saying a shameful—a horrible thing. Etienne didn't do it! He *couldn't* have done it! He likes you—he's your cousin! Oh it's too dreadful of you to say such a thing—I can't bear it!"

Her agitation stupefied Edward.

His hand let go of that warm, white wrist which he had been holding all this time.

"You speak very strongly!"

"Because you're so unjust! I can see it as you don't. You hate Etienne—you despise him. Maybe you're right. I don't know anything about that. Perhaps he is lazy, and unambitious, and all that kind of thing. It may be so—but oh, it's no reason, not the slightest reason in all the world, why you should harbour this cruel, unnatural suspicion against him."

Her attack was so vehement that Edward was astounded.

"Perhaps you are not aware," he said coldly, "that Etienne had quarrelled with me. He came to borrow money. I refused him. He was furious, and as I can think of no one else, and as I know Etienne was close at hand I think——" He paused, then went on angrily: "In fact I am pretty well sure that it was he who shot me, and I shall be greatly obliged if you will end your acquaintance with him forthwith. I do not choose to have him come any more to my house or be received by my wife."

"And if I refuse?" said Ariadne at last.

He stared at her for a moment in silence. Then he shrugged his shoulders. By an almost incredible effort of will he suddenly forced himself into a semblance of complete composure.

He even smiled.

"My dear child, remember that I am nearly double your age," gently. "I can't bear any disagreement to come between us. And surely you wouldn't actively oppose your will to mine?"

He spoke so reasonably, so kindly, that Ariadne felt

herself arrested, as it were, on the edge of some wild, tumultuous current. She paused. Her eyes looked into his ; grey eyes and blue, both full of trouble.

Edward, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, stretched out his arms and drew her towards him, overcome by an irresistible longing, and she drooped like a white lily against his shoulder.

"Oh, I'm so tired!" she murmured.

"Poor child! Rest there a moment. Let me hold you like that."

"May I come in, *mon cousin*?" cried a voice at the door. "I'm so sorry, but I've waited and waited till I'm beside myself."

In the doorway stood Etienne, a slight smile on his lips, and his whole figure and bearing delightfully expressive of his suave breeding.

One quick glance had shown him his cousin Edward's face change from the tenderness with which he was regarding his wife to swift anger. Then the anger was just as swiftly hidden. But Etienne had seen it. He knew it was there. And he told himself he knew the reason. He had witnessed that little scene between husband and wife—Ariadne's head on Edward's shoulder as she sat on the edge of his sofa, and Edward bending over her with that look in his eyes. Of course Edward was annoyed, argued Etienne, for an Englishman hates a witness to anything of that kind.

But Etienne himself was not in the least disturbed. He smiled and bowed in the doorway, and then came forward quickly.

Ariadne had sprung to her feet.

"I'm so sorry, Cousin Edward, that I intrude. And I do. I see it, of course. But I was so anxious to

see you for myself that I could not keep away. I have been here time and again in the hope of seeing you. Always it was impossible, but to-day Cousin Ariadne was good enough to think you might see me. She said so. But she was such a long time in coming back that I followed. Forgive me."

He held out his hand to Edward, who gave his in return.

Ariadne stood silent in the background, her white, sweet face the colour of her gown. She was agitated almost beyond control. Only by a mighty effort of will did she remain there, silent, motionless, her grey eyes fixed on the two men before her.

But she need not have been afraid. Edward Harding was the last man in the world to make a scene before a woman, and just because he was angry he became calm and self-controlled.

"Won't you sit down?" he said, waving towards a chair.

Etienne was delighted.

"May I?" he said, his face beaming. "Ah, but I am so sorry, *mon cousin*!"

He seated himself on a small chair near Edward's divan. He was strangely graceful. Whether he moved or stood or sat, he seemed always to fall into a perfect pose. He crossed one leg over the other, and his elegant patent leather boots, with their cream cloth tops, were in full view. He was very smart all over. He wore a light grey suit with a green tie, and a green Tyrolese hat, carried in his hand now. His black hair was immaculately done. He was young and lithe and noticeably attractive, sitting there in that graceful, half-sitting, half-lounging posture.

"You look better than I expected," he said, leaning forward, while a happy light played over his face.

"You've had a bad time, *n'est ce pas ?* "

"Thank you, I am much better," said Edward.

"I'm so glad."

"It's very kind of you."

"It's been a dreadful time for Ariadne."

Edward's mouth contracted, but so slightly that in a moment it was itself again.

So he called her "Ariadne." The man's pulse beat hard, and that blind, unreasoning jealousy that he now knew himself to be the victim of made a ruthless attack upon his composure. But he conquered it, outwardly at any rate. He wondered if she called him "Etienne." His eyes went swiftly to where she was standing. Very tall and pale she looked, and the image of a lily flashed through Edward's mind.

Then it came home to him that all this while she had not seated herself, and next moment he noticed that her hands were clasped tightly, a sign of agitation that he had learnt to translate. She was in distress. She was frightened.

He forced himself to say, in a kindly voice :

"Dear Ariadne, why is it you are standing ? "

Etienne sprang to his feet ; he had been so engrossed in his cousin Edward that for the moment he had forgotten Ariadne.

"Oh, pardon me, Ariadne ! " he cried, hastening towards her and drawing forward a chair. "How rude of me ! I thought you had gone away ! "

He drew the chair close beside his own, with an artlessness that certainly had no *arrière pensée* behind it, except that he thought that it would be nicer if they

all were near each other. Then he beamed on Edward, and then on Ariadne, and rubbing his hands together with a peculiar gesture, indicative of his extreme satisfaction, he said, in a boyish, joyful voice :

"Isn't this nice now! We three all together, Ariadne and you and I, Edward! It's so jolly!"

Ariadne held her breath. She saw the red creep into her husband's forehead, and she trembled.

But Edward reminded himself that a woman was present, and again he conquered that overwhelming desire to ask Etienne to leave the room.

"Are you still at the Laurels?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"Yes. It's so jolly there. I leave in a few days. Perhaps I shall come back again. Ah, that reminds me! Mrs. Allistone sent her kind regards to you, Edward, and hopes to see you soon." He looked at Ariadne. "She sent her love to you, Ariadne," he added.

"Thank you."

Ariadne looked up just then, and her eyes met Etienne's. A quick smile passed between them—a smile of liking and sympathy.

"I have no intention of seeing Mrs. Allistone," said Edward, his irritation getting the better of him for the first time.

"Do you mean me to tell her so?" asked Etienne, a little excitedly.

"If you choose."

Etienne drew himself up, and a dark, proud look crossed his face.

"But I—I do not choose to give a message like that to a lady."

"I certainly think it would be better not to," said Edward grimly.

A strained silence followed.

Through the open window came the soft, melodious cooing of the wood pigeons, and the ineffable scent of the white Chinese honeysuckle that grew against the house. A balmy, dreamy atmosphere was over all the garden; odours of roses and lilies and mignonette stole caressingly into the warm air. It was all so sweet, so full of the glamour of summer as it draws towards its end.

But in the library, how different! Angry cross-currents ruffled the stillness until the very silence itself seemed bristling with a thousand cruel little weapons made to wound and hurt.

Etienne began to speak.

"Cousin Edward," he said excitedly, "why is it that you show so strong a dislike to Mrs. Allistone? She is a friend of mine. I feel I have the right to challenge what you say about her.

"I said nothing," said Edward coldly. "Pray, Etienne, do not make a scene. Remember, men are careful what they say in England."

At that Etienne broke into an angry laugh.

"Well, I like that!" he cried. "That's good! From *you* that comes well, considering what you have just said about Mrs. Allistone, and not only now, but always. And it is absurd and unkind and untrue. There's nothing wrong with her except, perhaps, that she's rather extravagant. And you—you have always—you ought to know better considering that you once wanted her to marry you!"

Ariadne uttered a little cry.

Her lips parted, and her amazement was written plainly on her face.

"That is quite true," said Edward, calmly.

"She was engaged to you for several months," continued Etienne, "and you—you were madly in love with her. You thought her the most beautiful, the most charming of women. She didn't care particularly for you"—his excitement was increasing as he went on—"but you bothered her until at last she accepted you. And then——" He paused for breath—and sat glaring into Edward's face.

"Well—and then?" said Edward quietly. "This is interesting—let us hear the end of it."

"And then she broke it off because she couldn't stand you and your mean, sanctimonious ways. You were always preaching at her—preaching, preaching, preaching! You saw that she was beautiful, and needed pretty clothes, and you made that a bone of contention between you, though, as a matter of fact that was nothing to do with you—she was not your wife—she was only your fiancée. At last she could stand it no longer. She was too wretched to live. She broke it off, and afterwards she married Mr. Allistone. And, of course, you—you never forgave her. And now you never lose an opportunity of venting your petty spite upon her. Oh, it's contemptible of you! It's despicable! I'm only *un jeune homme*—and you—you're a middle-aged man, going on towards the fifties. It's time you knew better, mon Dieu, it is! It's shameful! I'm amazed at you!"

He jumped up and stood in front of Ariadne, staring at her with blazing eyes, his face pale with rage.

"You, Ariadne, you know what I say is true about

Mrs. Allistone. You know she is nice, you know she is charming, you like her. You've said so to me. You admire her—you've said that, too. You and she have met each other again—I don't know where exactly—but anyway, you've not found any fault with her? Is it not true? You like her?"

"I like her very much," answered Ariadne.

Etienne turned and glared at Edward.

"There!" he said. "Listen to that. A woman is a better judge of a woman than a man, especially a man who was once engaged to that woman; and here is your own wife going against your judgment. Bah! You make me sick, Cousin Edward. I have the honour to wish you good-day!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE ADVENTURES OF KIT

DEAR ARIADNE,—

This conversation is one of which I really ought to say nothing. I sought it out myself deliberately. I took a "tube" and two 'buses and a little walk to get to it; I put on my best hat because I was going to search for it; I wore my new veil and my least disagreeable expression because I was determined to meet it; I planned it a week beforehand; I turned my share of it over and over in my mind for hours at a time; I was determined that nothing should keep me from encountering it.

So it is practically my fault that it ever occurred, and is theoretically my worst fault that I seek to perpetuate it on note-paper.

As I entered the office it was just twelve o'clock. My heart beat time to the strokes of the big clock. The office boys heard only the clock. I heard only my heart and my own voice asking, "May I see the Story Editor?"

And by and by they took me to the Story Editor.

Hither and thither I was tossed, by little boys in caps, into a lift and out of it; from one peaked cap to another; down one passage, up another, down another; to another peaked cap; and at last to a door.

The door opened. The door shut. I was shut in. And there was the Story Editor.

It was twenty to one now, so nothing prevented me from attending to those loud thuds going on to the left of my chest.

I looked at him, hoping in a vague, mysterious, feminine way that if I looked at him he wouldn't hear anything, and he said to me: "Won't you sit down?"

I looked at him again, and wondered what the thuds were for. He wore the nicest boots I had ever seen. To be nervous with a man in elegant boots is an absurdity as pronounced as to be nervous with a woman in a new diamond coronet. One need never be afraid of people who are pleased with themselves.

I gazed at the boots, stole a glance at a resplendent collar and magnificent tie, glimpsed a smooth, sleek head, and entered, comfortable, into the conversation.

It was purely literary, as I have previously insinuated.

And I was just as literary as the conversation. All the time it was going on I was seeing it in purple ink, or blueblack ink, on shiny paper with or without lines, and while we two appeared wholly occupied, entirely serious, I was playing my giddy little mental game of battledore and shuttlecock, and pretending I didn't know what I was thinking, and yet knowing quite well that I knew all the time what I was thinking even when I was speaking to this literary and sarcastic—I mean sartorial—vision.

"You wish to write stories?"

"If you think I could."

"Our stories, don't you know, run on definite lines, don't you know."

"That was a good beginning," whizzed the shuttle-

cock ; while I inquired : " You don't mean that they are all to be alike ? "

" Not at all. Immense scope is offered."

" Do you want sensations ? "

" More or *less* sensations."

" Murders ? . . ."

" Not murders *because* they are murders. No, we are not very gone on murders. A big theft is more in our line. We like thefts because they are less harrowing than murders, and not so common, and they give more scope to the villainess."

" There must be a villainess ? "

" Oh, positively. We like her to be very bad, yet we prefer her to be treated near the End with a certain amount of kindness."

" Near the End ? "

" Near the Beginning you must bring in the Love Interest."

I saw myself bringing it in. I imagined it in a large flat parcel, something like a big fish. I could see myself entering, bearing it in my arms, announcing :

" Please, I've brought the Love Interest."

" Then there's the Allusion to the Mystery," continued he.

I had another picture of the door opening, and me coming in with a little tissue paper bundle, murmuring :

" Please, I've come with the Allusion to the Mystery."

" The Allusion to the Mystery must also come in near the Beginning, in the second instalment at least, but we like it best in the first instalment."

He was very, very serious. I wondered if he saw the Love Interest and the Allusion to the Mystery in the same shape as I did. I wondered if they materialized

and got wrapped up in brown paper in his imagination. I wondered if he saw them hard, concrete. I wondered if he ever tossed them about the room, threw the Love Interest under the table, and banged the Allusion to the Mystery against the wall. I wondered if he ever smacked the Love Interest on the head with the Allusion to the Mystery, and felt almost sure that that was what I should be doing, sooner or later, if I ever got mixed up with either of them.

But with infinite seriousness he was proceeding with the Conversation.

"The Mystery itself can be held back a little. The longer the better, as long as a hint is given every now and then."

And I saw the great day when the door should open and I should come staggering in under an enormous juggernaut of a packet, and should breathlessly gasp forth as I tripped and fell to the floor—

"Please, this is the Mystery at last!"

"We have always to remember that the Sympathy of the Readers must be with the good-looking girl, the Heroine," said he. "The Sympathy of the Readers is very important."

"How do you get it?" I asked.

"That is another point," said he. "You must get it early. Our experience is that if you don't catch the Sympathy of the Readers in the first instalment, you will probably never get it at all."

And there something told me I should never get it

I had no mental picture of a door opening and myself coming in with a halo round me and my hands full of glory, while everybody turned and stared and told me, even before I told them:

" Ah *you've* got the Sympathy of the Readers ! "

Something told me that the day would never come.

He got up, and began to walk about the room. For a man in such smart boots, such a tie, such a collar, endowed with such a tailor, such a well-kept, shiny, unemotional face, such smooth hair and white hands, his seriousness was a little provocative.

" Personally I prefer theft," he was saying, " and I prefer the thief to be a woman."

A ray of gladness illuminated my gloom. Then he would never mind if I stole the Conversation !

" A Wicked Woman is much more interesting to the Reader than a Wicked Man," said he.

" Much rarer," said I. But I need not have bothered about that.

He was thinking of the Wicked Woman as a parcel, as I had thought of the Allusion to the Mystery and the Love Interest. It would not have surprised him if I had one day come to him with something as big as myself in my arms and laid her on his desk, and cried :

" I've brought you the Wicked Woman."

" Then the Domestic Interest needs to be very strong," he went on. " That's one of the best ways of catching the Sympathy of the Readers."

" Does the Sympathy of the Readers feed on the Domestic Interest ? " I asked.

" We find that the Domestic Interest is one of the strongest—er—cards."

The word card struck me strangely. *I* could not see the Domestic Interest as a card.

I saw myself carrying something soft and squashy in a tub one day and telling the Editor I had brought

the Domestic Interest in—about three pounds of it.

“These stories must be English,” said the Editor ; “I mean to say they must have their chief interest in England. You might take them out to Italy after the Mystery has been quite fully developed and explained.”

“You mean when every one has given up reading the story ? ” I said, touchily.

“Not at all. I mean just previous to the introduction of the Allusion to the Minor Mystery.”

“Allusion to the *Minor* Mystery—Oh ! I think I must be going—I mean, I’ve trespassed on your time so long.”

And I fled.

And downstairs, at the door of the office, I met a big cart, packed with huge bales and parcels of every size and shape. I knew what they were—Allusions to the Mystery, Love Interests, Wicked Women, Minor Mysteries, Domestic Interests, Pity for the Villainess, Thefts, and maybe a few little Murders.

And now I feel sure I should have the Sympathy of the Readers if I could only make some one understand how all the Love Interest has gone out of life for me since that day ; how I never hear the faintest Allusion to a Mystery without seeing something wrapped up in paper and tied with string ; how I never read of a man committing a theft without thinking : “What a mistake ! He ought to have been a Woman ; ” and how all the Domestic Interest in my life now cries aloud for Sympathy, as its due, and never gets it, never must, never can.

Your affectionate friend,

KIT O'DOWELL.

To which Ariadne wrote back :

“ Please come back soon like a good Kit. I miss you in spite of your theory that married women never miss anybody ! ”

CHAPTER XX

THE STILL STRANGER ADVENTURES OF KIT

KIT'S next letter was better still :—

DEAR ARIADNE,—

“ This will be delightful,” said I to myself last night.

For there, on the pasteboard in my hands, gleamed the enticing little black legend, “ Mr. Crawford Splashes.” And there, in the doorway, was Mr. Splashes himself, clad in a fur-lined coat, and an expression of brilliant intellectuality.

I welcomed him gladly. I was enduring one of those mental conditions when the brain is hungry, but too tired to get up and find something to eat ; and thirsty, but too limp and stupid to see anything anywhere to drink. True, there were books on my shelves. But what were books ? I had forgotten how to read. I craved intellectual food. But I wanted to be spoon-fed. I could get nothing for myself. I was almost insanely stupid, and Mr. Splashes would feed me where I sat. I should lean back in my chair and he in his. Hunger and thirst would vanish from my wits. I should feel my tongue sharpen and grow delicate as salted almonds ; renew my old bright outlook ; sparkle like champagne ; turn subtle as soufflé ; and

revive my pet belief—that life is worth living as long as you can find some one worth talking to.

For Mr. Splashes, brilliant young member for Roweshire—well, that last Greek ode of his might alone have earned him his seat in the House. You could scarcely tell it from the antique.

“I am so glad to see you,” I cried, giving him both my hands.

I never give both my hands to any one who is not intellectual, be it observed. When there is an intellect in the room, it is with *It* that I shake hands, not with him. A pair of hands seems a very tiny little thing to give in token of genuine admiration and respect.

So I gave Mr. Splashes both my hands.

He held them a little longer than a duller man would have done, because his intellect saw that two hands needed twice as long a holding as one.

“What have you been reading?” I inquired. This may sound somewhat crudely precipitant. It was not irrelevant. You see, he had raised my fingers to his lips, just as they do in books.

“Because you always know everything that’s good to read,” I added quickly.

“But,” he said, “but—but—but, I do believe you’ve been——”

“Grizzling?”

“I was going to say home-sick.”

“I have,” I replied. “I am. I will be. I want to be. Please let me be.”

“I’ll help you to be more so, if you will tell me how. ‘Feed a cold and starve a fever.’ This is a case of cold. Come, tell me all about it. You’ve been think-

ing about mosquitoes. I see it in your eyes. You've been hungering for snakes. I read it in your cheeks. You've been dreaming about gum-trees, and Sydney Harbour, and kangaroos, and dingoes, and wombats, and—there, I don't know any more. I think that's all you've ever told me. Don't I remember it all well? "

" You dear nice man! You'd simply love Australia. Don't you think so? "

" Oh awfully! Positive I should be quite at home with the kangaroos, and great pals with the fat spiders you throw boots at."

" When sunshine steals over London, I confess I am haunted by my ' Land o' lots o' time."

" You needn't go all that way for mosquitoes. There are plenty in Paris."

" There is wattle in the street. There are snakes in the Zoo. There's a gum-tree in Lady L.'s conservatory. But it is in a pot, and oh! the difference to me! "

" And there is wattle in your hall. Has not your nostalgia advised you of wattle? "

I flew out of the room. Out in the hall was an enormous velvety golden and green bundle, that I seized in my arms and clasped close, burying my face in the yellow burrs. It had come from the south of France. It called itself " Mimosa." But it was wattle, all the same.

" How you love the stuff," said Mr. Splashes.

" So would you, if you knew."

" Should like to know how you do it."

" You can't know."

He looked at me in a way that meant, " For heaven's sake, don't cry." I buried my head in that mass of golden sweetness, and kept quite quiet for a few seconds.

"The only thing wanting is the mosquito, isn't it?" asked Mr. Splashes, in a low voice. I made no answer. I was far, far away.

Suddenly, quite close to me, there rose on the air the most delicate of sharp, thin, piercing sounds. It was almost in my ear. Ping, ping, ping, it crept through the stillness.

"Keep your eyes shut," whispered Mr. Splashes. "This is the great Porchester Street Illusion."

Illusion, indeed! He was the most beautiful mosquito ever heard. Every tone was to the life. He flew through the air; he moaned, he tweeted, he pinged; he did everything a mosquito does, except sting.

He even died.

He brought one hand down with a loud slap, on the back of the other, choked his war-song in his throat, and died the death of his kind.

And I, with my nose buried in the wattle with my eyes shut, and the sound of the mosquito in my ear, lay back in my chair, and revelled in an extraordinary ecstasy of happiness. The Illusion was complete. I was at home again. London faded. Mr. Splashes was wiped out. There was nothing in the world but the scent of wattle and the ping of the mosquito.

I opened my eyes once, and peeped. He was down on his knees near my chair. His mouth was screwed round, his eyes squeezed up, and an expression of agonizing earnestness and solemnity contorted his clear-cut face.

I forgot he was a mosquito, and a Member of the House of Commons. I put out my hand and patted him on the head.

"I told you I could die many deaths for some people,"

he said, unsqueezing his eyes and unscrewing his mouth.

"You die magnificently," I replied. "I was nearly frightened to look. I thought you might be squashed!"

"Be careful, then, in future."

I rose and laid a little sprig of wattle on the fire. A delicate smoke curled up; it stole to my nostrils, and whispered to me of summer, bush fires, and skies of turquoise.

Isn't there anything else we can do?" cried Mr. Splashes. Since he played mosquito he had thrown off years, constituents, and Greek odes. His grey eyes danced like a schoolboy's. His black hair flopped merrily across his brow.

"There is another thing. But I fear it would make me very, very homesick."

"But you'd like it?"

"Yes, I'd like it. But I have none."

"What?"

"Eucalyptus."

"Where do you get it? Drapers? Milliners?"

"Chemists. Bring me a little bottle. And then——"

When he was away I put on the kettle. It was boiling when he came back. He looked expectant, young, unparliamentary, like a fine shearer, not in the least like Odes or Licensing Acts.

"You little know what you're going to have," I cried.

"Medicine?"

"Medicine, indeed! Ambrosia! I'm going to give you *Billy Tea*."

"Sounds awfully friendly; almost familiar."

"Wait . . . !"

I poured one drop off the cork into the teapot.

Then I rinsed the pot with hot water. Then I made the tea.

"Is it nice?" he asked.

"Nice! Oh it's—it's—why that drop of Eucalyptus has given the flavour of the whole big, indescribable, lonely and beautiful Australian Bush. Do you like it?"

"Best tea I ever tasted."

"Please put a bit of wattle on the fire. . . . Now we're at a picnic . . . there are gum-trees all around us . . ."

"And I am sitting at your feet."

The fumes stole through the room. I shut my eyes.

Ah, the tender, sudden, unreal scent! It was too tender, too unreal, as it rose from the prosy London fire-place and weaved an image of fiery summers in the lamp-lit London room.

Mr. Splashes plucked the spray from the fire, and waved it before my face.

I sniffed, and sniffed, and sipped my tea, and saw blazing sunshine, and a wide world drowsing under an infinite blue sky, and sudden tears welled up. They sneaked over the brim, and ran down, down, down, right into the "Billy Tea."

"Don't cry," whispered a voice. "It's all so awfully jolly. *Please* don't."

"I'm not. It's the smoke."

"Have some more tea, out of the Billy. Do let me give you another damper. Shall I die some more? Would that make you feel better?"

He died twenty-five more deaths that afternoon.

"It seems to me there's a good deal of Illusion about this street," he said, later on.

He had put on his fur-coat. The shearer had dis-

appeared, and the mosquito. He was Crawford Splashes once more, or nearly.

"This has been the most delightful afternoon," he said.

And then, quite suddenly, I remembered the starved brain, and the Intellectual Conversation. I paused a moment, and debated within myself about plunging into Haeckel there and then.

But, while I paused, Mr. Splashes said :

"Next time, if I may come again, I'm going to be a fat spider. I shall lean against the wall, and you can throw a boot at me. I'll curl up and fall on the floor, and make a noise like a spider. Then you can say, 'There, I killed that tarantula that time,' just as you would if you were at home."

Good gracious ! Is this *my* influence ? And yet they really can't tell his odes from the Classics !

Your affectionate friend,

KIT O'DOWELL.

To which Ariadne wrote back :—

"The pursuit of literature seems far more exciting than I had imagined, and I scarcely dare repeat : 'Come back ; I want you' !"

CHAPTER XXI

ALL IN A GARDEN FAIR

IT was three o'clock in the afternoon, and all the world seemed asleep or dead, as Ariadne sat under a great lime-tree in the garden, reading or pretending to read a new book from Mudie's. She was dressed in white, and very fair and sweet she looked, her slight young form stretched out in a long wicker-chair, and her beautiful head lying in a nest of muslin cushions. She read a few pages, then the book dropped from her fingers, and leaning her head still further back among the cushions, she lay drearily gazing up into the blue sky overhead. She had abandoned the heroine in the story with all her troubles and her love affairs that never seemed to go right, and had let her thoughts wander to herself, to her own troubles, to the story of her married life. Lying there like that she looked a very desolate childish form, for the strange loneliness in her heart was gravating itself about those young sweet lips and eyes, and often she wished pitifully for Kit O'Dowell's lively company.

She had made a mess of it all.

That was what she was saying to herself.

She had tangled things up blunderingly, ridiculously, unforgivingly.

She was telling herself that also.

She had tried so hard, too, to play the part well. No one in the world knew how hard she had tried. She had meant to do her best for every one. But

everything had gone wrong, and daily she was more and more conscious that she and Edward were drifting further and further apart.

They met at breakfast ; lunch sometimes ; and always at dinner. They discussed things of the day. They were polite to each other. They treated each other with extreme courtesy, and inquired assiduously as to each other's wishes. They went about together. They dined with their neighbours occasionally. They gave dinner parties. They were, as far as any one could see, always quite perfect in their attitude towards each other. And the country said how well they got on, how pretty and discreet Mrs. Harding was for such a childish bride, and how admirable the marriage seemed to be.

But all the time there was an ocean between them ; a vast endless stretch of sea so desolate and bleak that Ariadne's heart shuddered at the sight, and as for Edward, he turned away manlike, and refused to look. It was too bitter, that great endless space daily growing wider between these two who should have been learning by now that life without love is utter loneliness, no matter how one tries to fill it.

Ariadne cried herself to sleep many a night, and in the morning came down looking like a ghost, but when Edward questioned her and asked her how she felt she always replied that she was quite well. She did not want a change. She wanted nothing. She was perfectly well and happy. Yes, she managed to say that sometimes, though the sadness in her eyes gave her the lie pitifully.

Edward, looking at her, winced. But what could he do ? He had suggested everything he could think

of, and she had quietly but unmistakably rebuffed him.

This afternoon he had taken Lady Harding in his big white car over to Gloucester, that dear old city that lies so sweetly in the midst of the green pasture lands, looking towards the Cotswold Hills.

Lady Harding was after antique furniture, and Gloucester is one of the best treasure troves in England for that particular treasure.

Suddenly, as the girl lay there dreaming, her fair face wreathed in inexpressible sadness, she started up and uttered a little cry, for coming towards her down the garden was a tall, slight, dashing-looking figure, clad in a very elegant coat and skirt of tussore silk, and a small black hat. Mrs. Allistone had persuaded Mrs. Bray, the wife of the famous millionaire chemist who was staying with her, to drive her over in her gaudy blue motor, cleverly excusing herself from inviting Mrs. Bray to come in. She had found out definitely that the Brays, to put it in her own words, "were no use." Secretly she was furious with them, and dubbed them vulgar upstarts, and outsiders, and all sorts of anything but pretty names, and she longed for their visit to come to an end, and gave them as many hints as she dared. But they were not sensitive to hints. They had come to the Laurels for a fortnight, and they meant to stay their visit out.

Having waved Mrs. Bray a lively adieu at the gates, Lallie unfurled her French parasol of black frilly chiffon and went leisurely down the avenue.

She could scarcely believe in her good luck when she was told that Lady Harding and Mr. Harding had gone out motoring and Mrs. Harding was alone in the garden.

A footman conducted her.

As she followed him her eyes began to shine and her lips took a happy curve. She was delighted. She had scarcely hoped to get Ariadne so completely to herself and with so little trouble. She had expected to run the gamut of Edward's interference, and perhaps of Lady Harding's insolence. Instead, she had everything her own way. She was clever enough to appreciate the advantage a garden would give her, for she guessed Ariadne's poetic temperament and was sure things would go capitally—just as she wanted them to—if she and Ariadne had their talk out under the heavy somnolent limes that swept the air with such tender perfumes.

“Dear Mrs. Harding!”

She held out two hands in a quick impulsive little way. Then as if carried away she leaned forward and kissed Ariadne on each cheek. “How perfectly lovely to find you at home and alone,” she said, her voice falling into low caressing tones that seemed to Ariadne to carry with them some gentle healing balm.

“I'm so glad too,” she replied.

She felt herself suddenly surrounded by an atmosphere of genuine warmth and friendliness such as was natural to her in her own home; suddenly she became conscious of the cold bleak air she had been breathing all these days past; she felt Lady Harding's frigidity; never had that large austere mother-in-law of hers looked at her with eyes that glowed with friendliness; never had she kissed her with warm impulsive kisses like Mrs. Allistone; all in a moment the girl's heart seemed to throb and melt; she had not realized—she had not dared to realize—how little tenderness there was

in her life nowadays ; her eyes filled with quick tears ; a poignant memory of home swept over her ; she felt the boys' arms round her and their rough kisses on her cheeks ; she heard Sandy calling her, " Ariadne, old girl," and Alice's soft voice saying " Ariadne, darling," and Fat Girl's warm little podgy hands clinging appealingly to her arm—and her father's loving embraces, as he clasped her and his bearded face touched hers, with a moved paternal kiss ; she had missed it all ; she had never guessed how much ; but now, at the touch of another woman's lips on her cheek and the close clasp of another woman's hands she realized to the full how barren of affection her days had been.

She thought of Edward, but defiance surged up into her heart. He was out. He could not interfere. She would let herself go for half an hour or so and be happy with this woman friend.

Impulsively she flung her arms around Lallie Allistone and in that close, almost hysteric clasp the elder woman read the loneliness in the other's heart.

Lallie did not understand it. She was amazed in fact, for she knew nothing of the real life of these two, and till her discovery at the cottage had supposed them devoted to each other. She was sure that Edward was not the man to marry a woman he did not love—she knew that to her own cost. She had supposed too that Ariadne—sweet, fair Ariadne—would be the last woman in the world to marry a man who did not possess her heart. She had thought of them always as ideally happy—the master and the fair young mistress of Harding Hall. She had envied them—how she had envied them ! She had told herself they had everything—love, wealth, position, youth.

She had even—unconsciously perhaps—set Ariadne up as a woman whose life was ideal—the woman whom she envied more than any one she knew.

Now, again, she got a sharp subtle inkling of some mistake. She felt in the very cling of those arms that this girl was craving for affection, that she was starved for a little demonstrative friendliness. In a moment she rose to the situation, resolving to grasp and make use of it even though she did not in the least understand it.

She held Ariadne close for a moment, then broke into a low laugh that seemed to naturally relieve the pressure of the moment.

“Dear child!” she said.

Nothing more. But just an emphatic squeeze that did the girl’s heart a world of good.

They drew away from each other. Ariadne’s great grey eyes looked a little shyly at her visitor as she asked her would she like to stay out here or to go indoors. Lallie replied exuberantly that she was for the garden. She loved the open air. She adored being under the trees, and to-day was so pleasant. She even ventured on a little quotation that came happily into her head just then. It was Longfellow, but it might as well have been Omar for all she knew:—

“A day on which it is enough for me
Not to be being but to be,”

she quoted softly, throwing a shade of joyous sentimentality into her voice, and drifting downwards with a slow movement of inimitable grace into the big basket chair that stood beside Ariadne’s wicker lounge.

“Cigarette?” she said softly, opening the little gold case that dangled among a lot of jingling fal-lals from a chain at her waist.

"Thank you," said Ariadne, "I'm so sorry I don't smoke, but I'd love you to."

"Thanks so much."

Lallie smilingly lit her cigarette, and began to feel that the Fates were extraordinarily good to her.

"We'll have tea out here," said Ariadne, "it's nearly teatime now. Edward and Lady Harding have gone to Gloucester. I'm all alone. I don't expect any visitors this afternoon. I'm so glad you came."

"Thank you, dear. It's awfully kind of you to be so nice to me. Now won't you settle yourself back in your long chair among the cushions."

She jumped up—if any one with such slow indolent movements could be said to jump—and with a gentle soothing grace put her hands on Ariadne's arms and pressed her back into the chaise longue and then stooping over her with her cigarette gracefully held out of the way in her left hand, she pulled the cushions carefully about, arranging them comfortably behind Ariadne's gleaming head. "There," she said, "now you're comfortable, aren't you, dear? I do love doing little things for people. It's the greatest joy in life to do something for any one else, no matter how small it is. Don't you think so, dear?"

She drifted back to her basket chair, and puffed luxuriantly, and Ariadne's answer came to her like a ray of light.

"Oh, yes, yes! I'm beginning to think there's nothing else worth while in life except to do things for other people."

They talked away happily then, Lallie leading the conversation and throwing into it all the verve and sparkle that made her such a charming companion.

Ariadne talked too. She found herself waking up now. Her eyes brightened. She knew herself reviving. She talked about home, and Sandy and Curt-Bird and Fat Girl and dear Alice with eyes so grey, and Dad, and the dogs and the horses, and it seemed to her that never since dear Kit's going, had she been so utterly at home as she was with this dark-eyed sympathetic woman whose every tone was a caress.

Tea came. They took it like two school-girls.

They were bubbling over with high spirits now. Everything pleased them; they revelled in the nice hot muffins and the various dainty little cakes and sandwiches that the butler brought out; but there was a difference in their joy. Ariadne's youth sprang from a genuine fount at her breast, while Lallie Allistone's was wholly assumed. She was playing a part. And presently she would divulge what her part was.

After tea she thought it was time to begin.

All the garden was dreaming and beautiful in the warm soft glow of the afternoon, and the greensward under their feet was like a carpet in which the great limes shed their delicate scented blossoms like snow. Lallie pulled out her watch and exclaimed how time was flying and that she soon must go. Ariadne begged her not to hurry. She was so very happy with her, she added spontaneously—she didn't think she had enjoyed any one's visit so much since she came to the Hall. She said she felt as if Lallie belonged to her own family.

"How sweet of you!" said Lallie gently. "I feel I know them all too. And now tell me, my dear—if I'm not indiscreet in asking, how is your poor invalid friend?"

The colour rose in Ariadne's face, dyeing her scarlet in an instant.

The eyelashes came down on her cheeks and the great eyes were hidden.

"He is better, thank you," she said. She was visibly embarrassed. "I shall never forget your goodness," she added quickly.

"Oh no, no. I was only too glad, dear, that my cottage happened to be empty." Try as she would to understand, Lallie Allistone knew herself a little at sea. She could put many constructions on the matter. But somehow she could not but be sure all was right, though Ariadne's scarlet blush was undeniable, and the shrinking dread in her face was also obvious.

Lallie leaned over and laid one long white hand, glittering with diamonds, on the girl's arm.

"I'm going to ask you to do something for me," she said, swiftly seizing her chance. "In a way it is for me, and in a way it is not, but—Oh, dear Mrs. Harding, the fact is I'm so worried—"

"Worried?"

"Yes, but not for myself. It's for poor Etienne. Do you know that poor boy is absolutely at his wits' end just now. He doesn't know where to turn. He made some unfortunate speculations—he told you of them I think—and that placed him in a very nasty financial position. And now, just now, when he's hardest up of all there's a chance of an excellent diplomatic appointment for him in Turkey which might be the very making of him. Only he has no money. Just £500 would do."

"Five hundred pounds?"

"Yes. That's all. It's a mere nothing, isn't

it? I'd give it to him myself if I had it, but alas! I'm only a poor lone little widow. I can't help people as I would like to."

"Oh, I wish I could!" burst from Ariadne's lips.

"You, why! how sweet of you, dear. It would be nice. And, of course as you're Etienne's cousin the dear boy wouldn't mind so much accepting it—as a temporary loan of course."

"Oh, but I haven't got it!" cried Ariadne.

Mrs. Allistone's quickness frightened her.

"Haven't you, dear? Oh, but surely you've got all you want and more."

"My money is all tied up," said Ariadne dismally.

"But your trustees could manage that for you," said Mrs. Allistone. She had grown pale. But she smiled always. She was determined to keep on smiling. Long ago she had learned that that was the only way to get money when you wanted it.

"Who are your trustees, dear?" she asked gently.

"My husband and my father," cried Ariadne. "I should have to get the permission of both before I could draw that sum."

Lallie Allistone was thinking rapidly. Situations like this were not new to her. She was quite sure she would wriggle through.

"Come up to town with me to-morrow," she said at last. "If you really want to help poor Etienne I'll give up a day and go with you. And I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take you to my own lawyers. And they'll advise you nicely and quietly as to how you can get the money. Yes? Oh, delightful! Well then, I'll meet you at the station at half-past ten to-morrow morning, and we'll travel up together."

CHAPTER XXII

NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKED

EDWARD had gone off for the day to Cheltenham, motoring his mother over there good-humouredly, since she had not yet come to the end of her quest for old furniture, and she had heard of a wonderful dresser, that according to descriptions was all that her heart desired. She talked of nothing else at breakfast. When Edward agreed to take her she quickly inquired of Ariadne what she was going to do, adding in a sort of lukewarm way that they would be glad of her company if she cared to come. But Ariadne was going to be busy, she said. She was going up to London in fact. She wanted to see about some dolls for a bazaar in the village.

She faltered a little as she said this, and her eyes were cast down on her plate, and Edward, glancing at her quickly, had an uncomfortable feeling that there was something hidden beneath her explanation. Angry with himself he tried to drive away his thoughts, and asked her politely if he could drive her over to the station. She declined gently. She was going by an early train and had ordered the dog-cart.

Nothing more was said. No questions were asked. The subject dropped.

At half-past ten Ariadne stepped into the train and

sat opposite Mrs. Allistone, whose expressive and sympathetic look seemed to act like wine on the girl's chilled veins.

"How good it is to be with you!" she cried.

She had told Edward nothing of Lallie's visit yesterday. Stubbornly she had determined that she would act as she thought right, and if he chose to be angry with her, then she must suffer his anger.

Their spirits rose as they flew through the soft, landscape country, stretching so greenly on either side of their swiftly rushing train. It was the first time since her marriage that Ariadne had been to London except with Edward or Lady Harding, and she was young enough to feel keen delight in having a woman chum. At Paddington they got a taxi and soon were flying through those dreary streets and then into the brighter regions about the Park and down Oxford Street, and at last into that haunt of lawyers, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Ariadne enjoyed it all like a child. She kept crying out as they rushed along, "Oh, look at the blouses in Peter Robinson's! Oh, do look at that extraordinary hat that woman has on! Oh, look at that little cart, driven by a lady, and wreathed in the Suffragette colours! How brave she must be to drive it through the heart of London!" Her fair face was glittering with excitement, and her exquisite fresh young beauty drew many eyes on them as they rushed along. Lallie was looking unusually handsome too, to-day, in a suit of yellow crêpon, with a cream hat wreathed in yellow roses that became her dark beauty marvellously well.

She caught sight of their faces in the little glass of the taxi, and inwardly she sighed with satisfaction.

She told herself that they were a beautiful pair, one so dark, one so fair, both perfectly gowned, both full of charm. Oh, but she was sure that no man in his senses could resist them! Her hopes rose high. She even regretted now that she had not asked for £1,000. She said to herself a little vexedly that really she was taking an awful lot of trouble over such a paltry sum as £500.

They alighted before a dingy-looking house in New Square and went gaily up the steps. Mr. Barnard was in. He could see them in a minute or two. As a matter of fact Lallie had written to him last night and wired also so as to be sure of the appointment. Almost immediately they were ushered into his private office.

They talked a little, Lallie explaining and Ariadne putting in a word very gently now and then.

Ariadne by this time was as eager to get the money as Lallie. The thought of helping poor Etienne, who had been so cruelly wronged by Edward, had become almost an obsession.

She looked pleadingly at Mr. Barnard, a hatchet-faced gentleman with sharp eyes that went through her like razors. And never had she seemed fairer and sweeter than when standing there in the musty office in her little white linen suit with a white straw hat on her head, and a big yellow rose tucked in the front of her gown. She was bewitching. She was almost too fair and fairy-like to be real. The lawyer was visibly fascinated with her appearance. Up, up went Lallie's hopes. She felt that the £500 was in her hands.

And then came disappointment.

It transpired that Ariadne was only nineteen.

Mr. Barnard gave his decision that nothing could be done. Ariadne could not possibly raise the money without the consent of her trustees.

"But they won't give it!" cried Mrs. Allistone. "Don't you understand? That's the whole difficulty. She doesn't *want* to go to her trustees. Oh, surely there must be some other way?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"The young lady is under age," he said. "That changes everything. I'm sorry. But really I can't advise you."

"But what ought we to do then?" cried Mrs. Allistone, her intense eagerness showing so keenly in her voice that Mr. Barnard gave her a sharp look, as if warning her to be a little more restrained.

"You had better go to the lady's own lawyers," he said. "There is nothing else for it. They may be able to advise her. I cannot suggest anything else except that."

There was a pause.

Ariadne looked extremely disappointed, sighed, and stared inquiringly at Lallie.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

Lallie tossed her head.

"We will go to your solicitors," she said.

Then she pulled out her watch and uttered a cry.

"It's half-past one," she said. "We must go to lunch. We'll go to some quiet little place where no one will know us. I know just the place. It's a dear little Italian restaurant in Soho—not too far from here."

They got into their taxi and in five minutes they

were alighting at the door of the said dear little restaurant.

To Ariadne's amazement, who should be standing near the doorway but Etienne.

So they all went in together.

CHAPTER XXIII

A VERY PARTICULAR REASON

THEY had the gayest, merriest, most delightful lunch that Ariadne had had for a long, long time. It seemed to her that she had suddenly stepped into a new world. They sat at a little table near the window, Lallie in the middle, and Etienne and Ariadne on each side. They bubbled over with high spirits. They frankly enjoyed the delicious Italian dishes, and the good red Chianti, and there swept over Ariadne now that never-to-be-forgotten feeling which always lies dormant in the veins of English people who have learned to love Italy ; the old sweet charm sprang up like magic in her heart ; the flashing of the waiters' black eyes, the gleam of their white teeth, was like sunshine to her, and the sound of the soft Italian language uttered around her on all sides, drove out from her brain the memory of those last few weeks of suffering, when all had grown so grey, so hopeless.

She was more than delighted too, at their unexpected meeting with Etienne.

It seemed to her that he was just the one thing wanting to complete the happiness of that gay little lunch party.

"How wonderful though, that you should just happen to be here !" she exclaimed.

She did not see the swift glance that passed between

Etienne and Lallie just then. She was helping herself to macaroni with a joyful hand.

"I often lunch here when I'm in town," said Etienne.

"So do I," said Lallie.

"I thought you were still at the Laurels," said Ariadne.

"I came up last night," said Etienne.

His green extraordinary eyes rested for a moment on the girl's lovely flushed face, and a look of profound affection gleamed in their depths. He seemed to awake suddenly to a sense of Ariadne's wonderful freshness and beauty—to the sweetness of her unselfish nature and to her warm spontaneous generosity. He told himself she was adorable. She was a brick. He felt that he would like to do something for her—something difficult and noble to make up to her for all that he felt sure she was suffering with that cold hard husband of hers.

She met his eyes and smiled, and at the smile the young man's heart melted completely.

Utterly unconscious of it was Ariadne, but that soft half-tender, half-friendly smile was destined to change Etienne's whole future. Dimly he felt awakening in him some of those splendid qualities that he had inherited from his Harding ancestors; they came to life under the magic touch of this fair girl's warm quick sympathy; the visions of the fine things that other men did came surging into his young impetuous brain; it was as though a banner had waved and the bugle been sounded, and some strange voice had called him to play a better part in the fight.

He glanced at Lallie just then. She was looking away and he stared at her for a moment, and felt sud-

denly startled. He had never seen her look like that before. He told himself in dismay that she must surely be wearing something that did not suit her to-day.

Then Lallie's wonderful smile—a smile which she kept expressly for men and which was quite a different quality from those that she meted out to her feminine friends—flashed over her face, and Etienne felt easier. She looked quite different when she smiled. She had not really looked coarse. That had only been his imagination.

They had coffee, and Etienne and Lallie smoked a cigarette or two, and then came the question of the lawyers.

Lallie knew now that Ariadne's lawyers were Edward's and she had begun to feel that it would be better for her not to accompany the girl there.

"Do you mind, dear," she said sweetly, leaning forward and laying that long white wonderful hand of hers, that was always so exquisitely manicured, on Ariadne's arm, "do you mind if Etienne goes with you this afternoon instead of me? The fact is, I have begun to feel a wretched touch of neuralgia in my eyes, and I think I must go and sit quietly somewhere until we go back to the train. If you don't mind—if you're quite, quite sure you don't mind—you can drop me at my Club in Piccadilly, and I'll rest in a big chair there till you call for me. So sorry, dear. But my neuralgia is an awful trouble. I've treated it too cavalierly and now it's making me pay."

Ariadne's sympathy was aroused in a moment.

"Oh, you've been so good in coming up to town," she cried, "and I do believe that all the time you've been suffering."

"Oh, not much," said Lallie with a brave smile.

She even contrived to look a little wan. It was one of her accomplishments, not the least useful one that she possessed.

They drove her to the Club and then Etienne and Ariadne went on in the taxi to the offices of Sir James Bond, the famous lawyer in the Temple.

It was agreed that Ariadne should go in alone. She knew Sir James Bond and she suddenly felt that if she were simple and direct and declared that she urgently wanted this money, that she did not want any one to know anything about it, she would get it. Etienne was to wait for her outside.

"Wish me good luck," she said gaily, as they parted.

She seemed to be unconscious that it was all for Etienne she was doing this, and the boy blessed her in his heart and began to feel more and more ashamed of himself.

"You don't mind going in alone?"

He held her hand in a tight clasp. "You're sure you don't mind, Ariadne?"

She laughed brightly.

"Not a bit," she said. "I like it. Really I do! I'm determined that I'm going to make these lawyers do what I want, and that's always an exciting thing for any one to aim at, isn't it? Good-bye!" And she was gone.

She went down a long whitewashed passage and crossed a court with an age-old plane tree growing greenly in its midst. Then through another doorway and up some incredibly narrow winding stairs that were thick with dust, and at last to the great oak

doorway with white letters painted on it announcing the chambers of Sir James Bond.

She had only been here once before, and that was with Edward, the day they came back from their strange honeymoon in Paris. Edward had brought her here to sign documents and to make her settlement complete. She remembered that day. It seemed hundreds of years ago. Since then she and Edward had been together for a long, long time, and yet, they were further apart now—much, much further—than on that hot, breathless spring noon. Her brow contracted. She sighed. It was strange that now, after all this time, she should receive this impression of having been so near to Edward then, so friendly, so confidential, so utterly at one with him; for she had been blind to all that then. She had even thought that they were very distant to each other. Ah, but how distant they were now!

Sir James Bond was coming towards her.

“My dear Mrs. Harding, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure,” he said cordially, his eyes taking in with delight the alluring picture of this beautiful girl in her dainty white frock and hat, with her sweet lips parted in an expectant childish smile of greeting, and her great grey eyes shining.

“I’m alone,” said Ariadne quickly. “I’ve come without my husband.”

She put her hand into his confidingly. She knew by instinct that Sir James was a man to be thoroughly trusted. He was like a rock. She had heard Edward say so often.

He looked a little surprised at hearing that she was alone, but he instantly took her into his own room,

and drawing a chair forward, begged her to sit down and tell him what he could do for her.

"But before I tell you," said Ariadne, "I want to ask you something. You are my husband's lawyer. Will it be necessary for you to tell him that I have been?" She flushed, and leaning forward continued rapidly, conscious of the look that had suddenly come into Sir James' clear penetrating eyes. "It isn't anything wrong that I want to do. It's simply this. I want to help some one. It's some one in urgent need of money. It's some one I know well—almost a relation in fact—and some one I like. And I have a very particular reason as well for wanting to help this—this person."

"Is he young?" said Sir James, in smooth bland tones, that were so smooth and bland that Ariadne completely overlooked the import of his query.

"Yes, he is young," she answered naively, "quite young."

"I thought perhaps it was so," said Sir James.

"Of course," continued Ariadne, "he didn't ask me himself for this money. But quite by accident I got to know that he was in need of it. And you see, Sir James, there's such a frightful, frightful lot of money lying there useless. And it's mine—or rather it's supposed to be mine—I mean it's been settled on me."

She began to blush again. For the thought of Edward's settlement always made her feel a little ashamed and uncomfortable.

"It is really mine, isn't it?" she asked anxiously. "I mean, there's nothing strange about my thinking about it as my own, is there, Sir James?"

"Certainly it is yours," said Sir James.

He was trying to read her thoughts.

She was not easy to read.

But he prided himself—this shrewd, smooth-spoken lawyer—that there were very few people on this earth that he could not see to the bottom of sooner or later.

"It's fifty thousand pounds, isn't it?" went on that eager girlish voice.

"I believe that is the exact amount that your husband settled upon you at your marriage," was the answer.

He waited.

"Well then, five hundred pounds out of that is nothing, absolutely nothing, is it?" said Ariadne. "I want it badly. I want it at once. If possible I thought perhaps I could take it away now. Would that be possible, Sir James, could you let me have it?"

"That requires thinking of," said Sir James.

He studied her attentively; she was the fairest, most adorable-looking piece of young girlhood that he had ever seen in those dingy chambers of his, whose windows looked towards the creeping Thames; she blossomed like a flower among the legal tomes that lined his walls from floor to ceiling; she looked a thing made for love and truth; and yet she was asking him to advance her money and to keep the matter secret from her husband.

"My dear young lady," he said at last. "There is really only one answer that I can give to your request, and it is more in the nature of a query than a reply."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean why don't you ask your husband?"

"Oh, I can't, I can't! You don't understand. He

would refuse. I don't want him to know anything about it. He would be angry with me, and he would not agree with me in thinking that the—the person to whom I wished to lend it is worthy. He thinks differently, but really—oh, really, Sir James, he is wrong. I know better about this matter and—oh, do help me Sir James, to get the money !”

“I can only advise you to go to Mr. Harding, and get his consent.”

He rang a bell, and when the clerk appeared, asked for certain documents to be brought to him. He studied these for a minute when they came, refreshing his mind with the facts of the settlement.

He shook his head.

“Quite impossible,” he said. “I can do nothing until you get Mr. Harding's consent. He is your trustee and while you are under age you cannot act for yourself. Your other trustee is your father.”

“Oh, Dad would give his consent at once,” cried Ariadne, “wouldn't it do if I got Dad's consent ?”

Before Sir James could answer, the door across the room was opened, and a clerk appeared. He paused, waiting to catch Sir James' attention.

“Yes, what is it ?” said Sir James, swinging round in his big swing chair.

“Mr. Edward Harding has come.”

Ariadne sprang to her feet, and all the colour fled in a moment from her face. She put her hands out piteously as if to implore Sir James to hide her, to stop Edward, to do anything on earth to prevent him from finding her there. But it was too late. Before a word could be said Edward was walking in through the door.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HUSBAND

FOR a moment Edward's amaze flamed in his eye ; then, quickly recovering himself, he came forward to meet Sir James, who was advancing towards him.

" Ah Sir James ! "

The two men shook hands.

Sir James was master of the situation. He remained perfectly calm.

He knew that this was not the moment to reveal anything of what had just passed between himself and that fair, shrinking young person with the guileless eyes who stood trembling in the background.

" You are just in time," he said genially to Edward. " Mrs. Harding is just ready for you."

Turning to Ariadne he gave her a kind look, under which lay a sort of silent command to pull herself together, and not stand there, white-faced and trembling, with that look of fear. As his eyes met hers she started. Then she understood his meaning, through all the blurred and feverish confusion of her brain, and next moment she had managed to half smile and say in answer to his remark—

" Oh yes, I am quite ready to go now."

" I should like to make an appointment with you for to-morrow," Edward was saying quietly to the lawyer.

"I want to see you about something rather important. Can you see me to-morrow at twelve?"

Sir James consulted his notebook and declared that to-morrow at twelve would suit him excellently.

All in a moment Edward had pushed aside his own business—almost startlingly important though it was—and had made up his mind that he would think of nothing but Ariadne. The very sight of her there alone, looking like a timid schoolgirl in her white frock and hat, roused him to some strange, alarming sense of a mystery that he did not understand.

For the life of him he could not imagine what had brought her there.

He was all in the dark.

But just because he had no knowledge whatever of what was going on with this young unsophisticated wife of his, just because he was so completely in the dark, and just because he had that sense of mystery, he determined that this was the moment when he must take care of her.

Never, if he lived to be a hundred, would he forget the queer feeling that attacked him at the sight of her in the lawyer's office.

It seemed as if some swift disintegration of his heart and reason took place, all in one breathless moment, and he experienced that horrid sensation of feeling solid earth crumbling away beneath one's feet.

Ariadne's words at breakfast returned to him in a flash, and he remembered the drooped eyes and that slight look of confusion as she said she was going to town to buy toys for the bazaar.

Why had she not added that she was going to call at Sir James Bond's chambers?

That would have been quite simple.

And what could she have come about ?

What was her business ?

A hundred and one thoughts went crowding and jostling through Edward's brain, but no sign of them was to be seen in his calm, self-controlled eyes.

He bade Sir James good-day, and, opening the door for Ariadne, saw her pass out, and followed her quietly down the stairs.

Down the narrow stairway where the dust lay thickly, out into the open courtyard, across the flagged yard, where the one solitary plane-tree stood looking wistfully towards the blue sky overhead that seemed to cry aloud of green trees and country fields and meadows, through the great arched portals with their heavy oak linings, past the adorable studded door that had seen such hundreds of years come and go, out into the narrow sidewalk. In silence they walked. Not a word was said.

Ariadne, a little in front, went with her head down-bent, unable to find a word to say.

Out in Piper's Court Edward paused and took out his watch.

"I suppose you are going back this afternoon?" he said quietly.

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"Our train goes at four-fifty. It's ten to four now. I think it would be as well for you to have a cup of tea. There's just time before we start for the station."

She made no answer.

In a dull, confused way she was thinking of Etienne and of Mrs. Allistone.

They would be waiting.

They would be wondering.

But she seemed to have lost all faculty to plan. Meekly and dumbly she went along at Edward's side.

"We'll get a taxi out in the Strand," he said presently. "There's one down there, but the man told me as I went in that he was engaged."

A cry reached them just then, and, turning, Ariadne saw to her horror that the taxi man was making after them and calling "Hi, lady!" in a loud voice.

She stopped dead.

On came the taxi with a swift rush and reached their side.

"Lady, excuse me troubling you, I saw you going away—I didn't know if it was you who was to pay me or the gentleman who came with you. He waited about here for ten minutes or so, and then I lost sight of him.

A tide of scarlet flooded Ariadne's face, and her eyes went miserably to Edward.

To her surprise, not the slightest shade of expression showed on his face. He was perfectly suave, perfectly kind, perfectly composed. He gave no sign that he had even heard those fatal words of the chauffeur—"The gentleman who came with you." He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out the usual masculine mass of gold and silver mingled that characterizes a man's pocket. Without a second's hesitation he said naturally—

"What's the fare?"

"It's run up to seven shillings now," said the man, inspecting his meter. "I've been waiting here nearly an hour. I brought the lady and gentleman from the 'Little Rome Restaurant' in Soho, and we stopped

at the Imperial Club in Piccadilly, and then came on here."

He poured this out complacently, utterly deceived by Edward's kindly glance. He had not the slightest idea that he was placing Ariadne on tenterhooks, and giving her one of the worst quarters of an hour she had ever known, while every word he said was going through that tall, quiet-faced gentleman like a knife.

"Seven shillings," said Edward in a matter-of-fact voice. "There you are, my man!"

He added a shilling and put the money into the chauffeur's hand.

Then he turned to Ariadne and said—

"Let us walk into the Strand."

"You don't want to take me on?" said the chauffeur.

"Thank you, no," said Edward composedly.

The very thought of getting into that taxi with Ariadne made him furious; he could scarcely tell why himself. He only knew that he would rather walk a hundred miles in search of another than drive with her in that cab. For he had guessed in an instant who the gentleman was: his mind never ceased to picture the two of them together, Etienne and Ariadne.

He saw it all.

They had lunched together in that Italian restaurant, of which he had more than once heard Etienne speak.

They had met by appointment; they had been together all day.

He set his teeth.

It was time that he began to wake up.

In the Strand they came upon an empty taxi-cab, and presently they had alighted at the door of the

Carlton, and passed into that soothing, gracious palm-room where even the most highly-strung nerves cannot fail to feel a little easier under the influence of low, sweet music, shaded lights, and gently-moving waiters.

They seated themselves at a little table, somewhat apart from all the others, and Edward ordered tea and some hot-buttered toast.

"As quickly as possible," he added, glancing at his watch again.

Ariadne, white and tired-looking, had sunk limply into a big, inviting chair, and seemed to have lost all initiative. Her will, in some mysterious way, appeared to have melted. Edward was guiding her. No, it was more than that! Although he looked so quiet and kindly, she was aware that there was some strange masterfulness working beneath his calm exterior, and she could feel him quietly controlling her all the time.

The waiter brought the tea very quickly, setting it out daintily before them.

"You're tired," said Edward; "you must let me pour out for you."

"Thank you."

She was incapable of saying anything more.

* * * * *

In a dream she watched him carefully manipulate the teapot, while he inquired in a kindly tone if she took two lumps of sugar and if she liked a little more cream?

"Thank you. That is very nice," she managed to ejaculate.

Nothing could have exceeded the kindness of Edward's manner, as he busied himself in putting hot

buttered toast on her plate and arranging things comfortably in front of her. Once she glanced at him piteously. He was not looking, and yet, somehow, he seemed to feel her glance. He said, in a cool, matter-of-fact voice—

“ We have just twelve minutes for our tea.”

He looked so big and strong that the girl felt herself, in spite of all her distress, unaccountably soothed by the mere sight of him.

He was wearing a suit of light-grey tweed which made him look even bigger than usual and he somehow seemed to stand out from all the other men about. He had an air of manliness and determination that Ariadne told herself was not to be found in any of those sloping-shouldered beings who were drinking tea to right and left of them.

She had never seen him officiating at a tea-table before, and the contrast between the femininity of making tea and the man's marked masculinity made him appear even more manlike than usual in her eyes.

She tried again to think of Etienne and Mrs. Allistone, but they went slipping out of her mind, in spite of all her efforts to think clearly of them.

By and by she would be able to plan and piece together.

For the moment she was nerveless, overstrained, almost helpless.

Edward was alarmed at her pallor.

“ I hope you had some lunch ? ” he said sharply.

“ Oh, yes ! ”

A tide of crimson again swept treacherously into her cheeks, and the very effort of trying to appear unconcerned gave her a doubly-guilty look.

Edward said quietly that he was glad of that, as he knew that ladies alone often took nothing but a cup of tea in order to get more time for their shopping.

"And your toys?" he said. "You got them all satisfactorily?"

"Toys?" She looked at him blankly.

"The toys for the village bazaar," he said, prompting her. "You said you were coming up to town to buy them."

"Did I?"

Again she was scarlet, and her eyes could not meet his. Stumblingly she managed to falter out—

"I—I forgot all about them."

But she dared venture on no explanation as to how or why she had forgotten.

All about them was that gentle, artificial atmosphere of the tea-room, with low music playing sweetly, and fashionably dressed people sitting about, or moving silently like shadows in and out of the palms. A dreamy languor seemed to pervade the scene, and it came over Ariadne that she would like to shut her eyes and lean her head down against something soft, and remain there silent and motionless for a long, long time—perhaps for ever.

She had failed miserably to-day.

She had blundered left and right.

She had failed Etienne.

She had failed Mrs. Allistone.

She had not got the money. She had left her two friends in the lurch without a word of explanation. She was very miserable.

"I think we must go now," said Edward.

She rose to her feet, and stood swaying a little.

buttered toast on her plate and arranging things comfortably in front of her. Once she glanced at him piteously. He was not looking, and yet, somehow, he seemed to feel her glance. He said, in a cool, matter-of-fact voice—

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"I think we must go now," said Edward.

She rose to her feet, and stood swaying a little.

By a great effort she managed to regain control of herself, but not before Edward had seen how faint and white she looked.

Gently he took her hand and drew it through his arm.

"You had better lean on me," he said, in a low voice. "You'll be better when you get out of this warm air."

In the taxi, as they flew towards Paddington Station, she lay back in her corner, her eyes closed, her head swirling unkindly just when she wanted to appear calm and undisturbed.

Edward glanced at her once or twice, and her lips contracted. She was suffering, mentally and physically, he was sure of that. He knew perfectly well that she was thoroughly miserable.

She was not hardened.

She was still a mere baby—an ingenue—at deception.

Oh! but how glad he was of that little falter in her voice when she had said quite truthfully about the toys, "*I forgot all about them!*"

How glad he was to be able to find just that little green oasis in all this desert of concealment and deception.

He found himself clinging to that, and the pathos of it struck him every now and then—it was so little for a man to cling to, the fact that his wife had not lied.

But why should she lie?

Why should she be expected to lie?

Why was she not on a pedestal, far, far above the dark, corroding taint of such earthly meannesses as lies and subterfuges?

His heart groaned within him.

He knew now that the time had come when he must use all his judgment and all his tenderness and all his worldly lore in guiding this frail, sweet bark that seemed to have got adrift on some perilous tide.

CHAPTER XXV

INTERLUDE !

THERE was the usual bustle at Paddington, but at last Edward and Ariadne found themselves safely ensconced in the corner of a comfortable first-class carriage bound for Gloucester.

They were alone. No one else entered their carriage. The whistle blew, the train moved, and they were off.

Each remained silent now, thinking their own thoughts. Edward had for a moment ceased pondering over Ariadne and her mysterious doings, and, as the train flew on into the smiling green country that grows more gentle and poetic the further westward one goes, his brow assumed a grave, even careworn expression.

He leaned back in his corner and stared through the window at the rapidly-moving meadows and hill-sides. But he saw nothing as they passed. He was blind to those tender, little red-brown notes where some age-worn cottage seemed to steal warmly out of the dim green landscape ; he was insensible to the elms and woods full of live young birch-trees, with the red sun showing through the colonnades of their straight slim trunks, pillar-like and mysterious as some old cathedral, in the softness of the evening light.

He was a man who loved Nature in every fibre of

his being, but to-night he stared out blankly and saw nothing whatever.

Under his breath he muttered once, as his brow frowned over a long, particularly unpleasant recollection—

“ It’ll be an ugly business if we can’t pull it through.”

It had caused him the greatest inconvenience, the putting off of his interview with Sir James Bond and he was realizing that now and chafing at the delay. But he was not regretting it. He had acted on an impulse, it was true. But he felt sure his impulse was right. He was the one who stood as guardian to this girl, who, after all, was only a child. She had been placed in his hands. The world looked upon him as her husband.

He blamed himself for not having taken more care of her before to-day, when she had come to the pass of rushing up to town on a fabricated pretext and then lunching at some shady little Italian restaurant, of which Edward, with his rather formal English prejudices, immensely disapproved for any of his woman-kind.

And then—then driving about London in a taxi with some unknown man, or else with Etienne ! And then paying a secret visit to the lawyers, and looking the very soul of confusion and guilt when he chanced upon her there !

He had felt bound to assume the charge of her from that moment, letting his own worries stand aside in the light of this, which was, perhaps, even more vital—who knew ?

To-morrow morning he would go up to town again, and then he would have his interview with Sir James.

He found himself wondering at this point whether

warm, but not too heavy. At last they found the very thing, and the girl gave a little sigh of content as she slipped it on, and buttoned it round her.

They made their way back to the station then and just caught their train, arriving at the Hall about ten minutes before dinner.

Ariadne paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs, and, looking at Edward, said in a faint voice—

“Would you mind very much if I don’t come down to dinner? I’m so sorry I’ve been a frightful trouble to you this afternoon, and you—oh, you’ve been so good, I can never forget it, while I——”

She paused, unable to go on. She clung to the pillar of the carved oak balustrade, the floor was slipping away beneath her feet, and Edward caught her in his arms.

And just then a telegraph boy arrived.

Lady Harding had appeared on the scene and was standing in a dignified way in the background, while Edward was bending over Ariadne, whom he had laid on the settee, rubbing her cold hands, while James held some brandy to her lips.

No one attended to the telegraph boy, who presently thought it better to make himself noticed.

“There’s a wire here,” he said, in a lowered voice. “It’s for Mrs. Harding.”

Lady Harding took the little brown envelope in her hand and surveyed it through her pince-nez. It seemed to her that the arrival of a telegram at such a moment as this must inevitably be connected in some way or other with disaster. Some one was dead, perhaps. If so, it behoved her to learn the truth so as to break the news gently to Ariadne.

She opened the envelope.

"I will read it," she said to the boy, "and see if there is any message to go back."

Fixing her pince-nez firmly she read the following message—

"Did you get money? Please come over Laurels to-morrow. Waited two hours for you.

"ETIENNE."

She stood staring at it with a puzzled air, when Edward turned round.

"Edward, dear," she said, "here's a telegram!"

She lowered her voice discreetly and mysteriously.

"I thought it might be bad news, and took upon myself to open it. I don't understand what it means."

She handed it to him as she spoke, and he read it before he realized that it was for Ariadne.

CHAPTER XXVI

RESOLUTION

A RIADNE opened her eyes to find herself lying comfortably in the white nest of her luxurious bed, while across the soft rose-pink of her carpet a leaping fire was throwing warm red lights. She had a confused remembrance of having been undressed by her maid, but everything had been indistinct in her mind; and, as she lay there, coming slowly back to consciousness, she experienced a sensation that was nearer happiness than anything she had felt for a long time. She had forgotten her cares. That was the truth of it. This weakness and nervous exhaustion had driven out for the moment all those other troubling things.

Over by the fire in a big chair some one was sitting reading.

Her eyes rested on that figure. For a minute she looked unrecognizingly, and then she realized it was Edward.

She stirred and sighed.

Immediately Edward was at her side.

"What time is it?" she said.

He drew out his watch, smiled, and said that it was just two o'clock in the morning.

"You're better now?" he added anxiously, seating himself on the edge of her bed.

She sighed.

"Oh, yes, I'm well! I fainted, didn't I? I was tired!"

"Yes, you had been going through too much," said Edward.

Everything came rushing back to her now, and she realized the painfulness of that long exhausting day in London.

She remembered about the money.

She remembered Etienne.

She remembered Mrs. Allistone.

Her brow contracted, and she put her white hands, with a feverish little gesture, to her forehead.

"Don't think!" said Edward, speaking to her in a voice of such incredible tenderness and softness that she could almost have believed herself nothing but a little sick child. "I'm going to give you some hot milk now. Then you must sleep. And to-morrow you'll be all right."

He rose and went over to the fireplace, and she saw him, in the dim, pleasant weakness that her mind was full of, bending over a small receptacle, and then pouring hot milk into an invalid's cup.

"Drink it up! Drink it all!"

He sat and watched her, and when she had emptied the cup he took it away and then came back and seated himself in a chair near her.

"I'll stay here until you fall to sleep," he said.

She said nothing, but closing her eyes, turned her head away to hide the tears that had welled up suddenly.

"You are not sleeping," said Edward's voice. "You are thinking. Do try and not think, like a good child!"

"I can't."

She moved her head a little, and he saw by her eyes that she had been crying.

He hesitated for a moment, and then came and sat on the edge of her bed again and took her hand.

"Perhaps if you told me about it you would feel better," he said, and in his mind was that telegram and those words.

What the full significance of that telegram was he could not understand, but he knew something was wrong.

"Would you like to tell me?" he added presently, still holding her hand in that kind, protecting clasp. "Remember, I want to help you. It's my duty, in the first place—and, besides, I *want* to. I'm older than you, years and years older. I know something is worrying you terribly. Won't you tell me what it is?"

He paused, and sat looking down on her, hesitating again over his words. Then he went on—

"I should be a poor sort of fellow—not worth the name of a man—if I could not make myself useful to you when you are in trouble. You're so young—only a child really, aren't you? Perhaps I am to blame. I've been bitterly reproaching myself about it, almost from the first, but I—well, it was all so unforeseen."

"What do you mean?"

She had raised herself among her pillows and sat staring into his face with wide, grey eyes.

A light silk shawl of pale blue was thrown round her shoulders, and seemed to add startlingly to her fair, fragile beauty. Her red-gold hair was tumbled about her brow and shoulders. Never had she looked more lovely.

"I mean about Etienne," said Edward.

"Etienne?"

He saw the change that came over her face, and in spite of himself he winced.

"Yes; it was I who introduced him to you; it was I who brought him into your life. And he—he is young, of course, young and attractive. You like his company—why, it's only natural. Of course, you find him a delightful companion. I have told myself that a hundred times. You and he are of an age, more or less, and life has been dull for you here, all this long, wet summer, shut up alone with me. I ought to be glad that you found a pleasant companion—I *am* glad!"

He was putting a strong control upon himself as he went stumbling along through all these things that it seemed to him must be said at last.

"But oh, Ariadne," he went on, "I do wish that it was not Etienne you had made such friends with—I wish it was any one else. You see, I know him so well. I've no respect for him whatever. And, besides—well, I think that it is only human of me to resent your friendship with the man who I honestly believe, from the very depths of my reason, shot me in the most cowardly and mean way in the dark, simply because I had refused to lend him any more money."

About them stretched the intense silence of a warm, firelit room; ever and anon some tiny, leaping flame from the grate reflected itself in the dainty chased silver of Ariadne's hand-mirrors and scent-bottles and hair-brushes.

All was harmonious, comforting, full of those delicate little material assurances against the harshness and

coldness and stress of life that a luxuriously appointed bedroom so subtly breathes out. The wind had risen, and was howling dismally through the great elms in the garden, stirring the leaves that were clinging with a last feverish energy to the great branches, and driving them in miserable, shivering little masses to the ground. Wind and cold without, falling leaf and fading tree, the end of summer, the swift onrush of autumn that soon would drive the garden into the hard, stern ways of winter : but warmth and stillness within, and in the stillness Edward held his breath and waited.

"To-morrow !" whispered a weak voice from the pillow, after a long, long silence. "To-morrow I'll tell you all—not to-night ; wait till to-morrow !"

For the resolution had now seized her to confide the truth to him about William.

Come what would, she must let him know the terrible injustice he was doing that poor lad.

Bending over her, Edward raised her hands to his lips.

"Thank you," he said simply. "Our marriage hasn't been much of a success so far—it can never be a success if there is not complete confidence between us. Secrets and mysteries are the death of happiness. Let us be brave and do away with them all, Ariadne, and then—then maybe we shall get on better. Thank God, it's never too late to begin again."

He checked himself in whatever else he was going to say.

"Now go to sleep," he added quietly. "I'll sit over by the fire, and you can forget that I am here. And in the morning when you are quite well and rested,

then we'll talk together like true friends—trusting each other completely.”

He smiled down at her, and, bending over her again, put his fingers with a half-playful, half-tender movement, on her eyelids, closing them over her eyes as though she were a child.

Five minutes later the sound of her regular, even breathing told him that she slept. But he sat on there by the fire till dawn came in through the window ; and as he faced it, there was a look in his eyes as of one gazing gladly into the future, and seeing rose-lights break across the far horizon after the dreariness and darkness of a winter's night.

Had she not said to him, “ To-morrow I'll tell you all ” ?

CHAPTER XXVII

. . . AND TO-MORROW !

NOON was long past, and the birds were singing gaily in the gardens, where a burst of sunlight had condescended to bathe the world in a new assurance of light and brightness, when Ariadne woke from that long dreamless sleep.

Instantly the scene of last night came rushing back into her brain, and she felt a glow at her heart at the thought of how they two had talked alone together, and how near they had come to each other then.

And then she remembered that this morning she was going to tell all. But strangely enough, she did not shrink from it now. She seemed to have come to a clear and normal point of view, and she realized that to place utter confidence in Edward was the only thing possible at this juncture.

Her maid came in, and finding her pretty young mistress awake, went to bring her some tea, saying that she had been in several times, but that the master had thought it would be better to let her sleep.

Ariadne felt better after her tea, and decided to get up soon and dress.

Then the door opened gently and a girl in a grey frieze coat and skirt, with a little grey tam-o'-shanter on her fair head, came gliding in, pausing for a second

at the door, then hurrying across the room, her face lit up with delight.

"They telegraphed last night, and I've come," said Alice, reaching Ariadne's side. "And oh, my dear, it is such a relief to know that you are better this morning, that you have slept all night long, and to see you looking thin but well."

Next moment the sisters were in each other's arms, and an ineffable feeling came stealing over Ariadne as her head sank on Alice's shoulder, and those warm, sisterly arms closed round her.

She cried a little, and so did Alice, and their tears mingled together, and they both laughed at the same time and both began to talk together, and all in a moment Ariadne had forgotten that she was mistress of Harding Hall, and had gone back in a flash to her girlhood.

Questions came pouring from her lips, to be met by a perpetual flow of questions from Alice ; and then they laughed afresh, and cried afresh, and hugged each other again, and felt how good it was to be alive.

"I didn't know that you were coming," said Ariadne. "It was the last thing in the world I should have dreamed of. How kind of Edward to send for you !"

"Yes, wasn't it ! And he met me at the station this morning, and drove me here himself. Dear Edward ! And, oh Ariadne, he was so nice to me, so wonderfully nice. I'll never forget it, never ! As we were driving along I told him all about William, and that we were going to be married in a fortnight, and he was so sympathetic. Why, what's the matter, Ariadne ?"

Her young sister's face had suddenly blanched.

"Nothing. Just a pain in my head. It is better now. Yes, tell me, Alice, tell me about William. Married in a fortnight! You—you love him, and he—he cares for you just as much as ever?"

Alice had a great deal to say about William. It seemed that there was never any one like him; but his illness had been a great grief to her, and was still a heavy cross, to be borne with hope and patience; his constitution had been shaken to pieces by fever and ague; the doctors said—poor Alice's lip quivered at this, and her hands clenched themselves tightly together—the doctors said he must be very careful, very careful indeed; he must have no worries, no cares—he must be taken care of in every way for the next year. He was really in an extremely precarious state of health, the slightest mental worry would tend to bring on a terrible attack of melancholia.

"And so we are going to be married quickly, and go straight away to the South of Italy, and there I am going to nurse and look after him. Then I feel sure he will get all right."

"He's sure to get all right," echoed Ariadne.

"Poor William!" sighed Alice. "Oh, if you could see him, Ariadne, you'd understand how I feel. He's changed almost out of recognition. But there, please God, it will all come right. Anyway, I didn't come here to tell you about my troubles. I came to look after you."

"How dear of you to come!"

"But it will only be a peep, Ariadne darling, for I must go back to-morrow. And Sandy, and Jocelyn, and Curt-Bird, all send you tons of love, and Fat Girl sends you hundreds of kisses. And they all

want to know when you are going to ask them to stay, and Dad says would you like to come home for a week ? ”

Ariadne was silent.

“ And oh, Ariadne, I do hope that you’re happy, darling, that everything is all right ! ”

“ Oh yes, yes ! Quite, quite ! ”

* * * * *

That afternoon, as the gloaming was gathering, Edward came and knocked at Ariadne’s boudoir door, knowing that she was in there and alone, for Alice was writing letters in the library.

“ May I come in ? ” he asked gently.

Then in a moment he saw by his wife’s face that his presence there was anything but welcome, and a cold feeling of dismay assailed him. What had happened to change her so ? Why was she looking at him like that, with her eyes full of shrinking and dread ?

He seated himself beside her on the sofa where she was sitting.

“ Now, Ariadne, shall we have our talk ? I’ve come to receive your promised confidence.”

“ Edward, I have nothing to tell you,” said Ariadne jerkily.

He started.

“ What do you mean ? How do you mean—‘ nothing ’ ? ”

“ Nothing,” she repeated, drawing a deep breath.

Edward stared at her incredulously, unable to comprehend for a moment.

“ But last night you promised me,” he broke out after a minute. “ Come, Ariadne, don’t go back on that promise. Be careful ! Think what you are

doing ! We're not children playing at the game of life ; we're grown up—we're a man and a woman."

She was silent.

" We've got to play our parts decently, for every one's sake, to say nothing of our own self-respect. And I tell you, Ariadne, by withholding your confidence from me, you are deliberately wounding my opinion of you."

Never had he looked like that before, all the kindness vanished from his expression, an immense sternness and determination revealing itself in his lips and eyes.

Ariadne looked at him, fascinated by the change, and womanlike, although she shrank from this new, hard-faced Edward, she felt a secret feeling of delight.

" Before we go any further. *I* have something to tell *you* ! " he continued.

He drew out his pocket-book, took a telegram from it, and laid it in her lap.

" That telegram came for you last night, and was inadvertently opened by my mother while you were lying there in a dead faint. And I—inadvertently too—I read it. I learnt the contents before I knew what I was doing. So you met Etienne in town yesterday, did you ? "

" Yes."

" Did you lunch with him ? "

" Yes."

" At the Restaurant Piccola Roma in Soho, I suppose—one of Etienne's haunts ? "

" Yes."

" And he tried to borrow money from you ? "

No answer.

" First he shoots at me, and then—— "

"You wrong him!" she burst out! "I've told you this before. I *know* he did not shoot you. He could not. He is incapable of it. Some day, perhaps, you will have to acknowledge the awful injustice you are doing him."

Edward regarded her with a cold, impassive stare.

"You're strangely sure of that," he said in a measured voice. "Your partisanship of Etienne strikes me as being just a little—pardon the word—unbecoming!"

For one moment she found herself assailed with a wild longing to throw herself into his arms and tell him who his unknown assailant was.

But with a mighty effort, she resisted.

In her mind's eye she saw William haggard and ill, and heard the ominous warning of the doctors that Alice had told her of this morning.

She could not be the one to mar poor Alice's happiness—to cause a possible scandal between the two brothers-in-law—to wreck every one's peace, and perhaps drive William to his grave.

White and trembling she lay back in a corner of the sofa, and under her breath she said to herself—

"Keep silent! Be firm! It is the only thing to do—at any rate until William and Alice are married and have departed for Italy. By and by you can tell all."

Edward rose.

"I am going," he said coldly, that stern look seeming to harden and freeze on his face as his eyes met hers. "But before I go there is just one thing I want to say. You're my wife in name, at any rate, and I intend to take every possible care of your reputation and of mine."

She started.

"Since you withhold your confidence from me, I consider it my duty to find out what you were doing at my lawyer's yesterday. I put off my appointment with Sir James Bond this morning expressly on your account, so that I might be here when Alice arrived, and so that I might hear the confidence you promised me last night. But now everything is different. It is an ugly thing to say, but my heart is full of mistrust of you, Ariadne, and it will be a hard task to make me believe in you again."

He left her then, and the shadows came creeping into the room, creeping, creeping into their lives, creeping over their hearts, blotting out with a terrible callousness all those faint, delicate tendrils of joy and sunlight that had been springing up since last night. If they had only known how to nurture and protect that most fragile, most lovely of all earth's flowers—the flower of love and confidence!

The door opened quickly.

Looking up, she saw Edward again, standing in the doorway, with a letter in his hand, which he had just received.

"I am sorry to trouble you. I have just come back to tell you that I am going up to town immediately, and shall not be back to-night—perhaps not for several nights. I think it is as well for me to say to you now something I may not have an opportunity of saying otherwise for several days. I wish to cut down our expenses here. You will oblige me if you will aid me in an effort that I am about to make at retrenchment."

"Retrenchment!"

She echoed the word vacantly.

"Yes, it's not a pretty word," said Edward, "and believe me no one in the world is sorrier than I am to have to mention it to you. But it is necessary and it may be that it is going to be more and more necessary."

And he was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE THIRTY-ONE YEARS OF LALLIE

MRS. ALLISTONE sat in the drawing-room of the Laurels, her dark face wearing an expression that was anything but pleasant.

She was alone. All her guests had gone, and their visits could be scarcely termed successes, for nobody had done anything for her beyond taking her about in a motor-car or so. And that was nothing compared to what her greedy, money-loving soul was craving for. She had tried two or three little deals with various of her visitors, but she had succeeded in nothing. Instead, she had been left with the unpleasant consciousness that they would all go back to town and talk about her.

She was feeling herself particularly ill-used to-day, for it was three days since that expedition of hers with Ariadne to town, and not one word had she heard from the truant.

She had wired. She had written twice—carefully guarded little letters. But she had had no answer. She had discussed the matter with Etienne till she was sick of it, and grew quite angry with him, and said little bitter, gibing things which she knew were unwise—dangerous even, if she wanted to keep the young man's admiration and affection.

She was disappointed. She had thoroughly be-

lieved that Ariadne was going to get her that £500, and she had built all sorts of fairy castles with the money ; she had even ordered two new dinner dresses, a new riding-habit, a new theatre cloak, and a lot of new hats in anticipation. And then, not a word from Ariadne.

Etienne's account of what happened at the lawyer's was that he had been waiting outside when he suddenly saw Edward Harding go down the alley towards Sir James Bond's chambers. He knew that it was inevitable then—Edward's meeting with Ariadne—and he thought the wisest thing he could do would be to disappear ; so he went straight back to Lallie Allistone at her club and told her what had happened.

They waited.

Four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock.

Still they waited, thinking that Ariadne might come back, but she never came.

Mrs. Allistone knew full well the folly of a woman at her time of life worrying and getting angry, and yet somehow she wanted that money so badly that she could not control herself.

She rose, and began to pace up and down her drawing-room, with its soft pink carpets, and curtains that let in the dimmest, pinkest light, and a few photos and bibelots scattered about, and not many flowers, but those very choice ones.

Suddenly she came to a decision.

She would wait no longer for news of Ariadne. She would go herself to the Hall. All in an instant, her mind was made up, and, sweeping away to her bedroom, she rang for her maid to come and dress her.

" But don't make me look smart, Marthe," she said.

"I want to look pretty, charming, but not smart, not elegant. As if I am a little sad, rather down on my luck."

She laughed with appreciation of her own wit.

"Madame will wear black," said Marthe.

"Yes, certainly; black. All black. Black hat, black shoes and stockings, black frock, white gloves with black stitching, that will serve to throw up the blackness of all the rest of me. And rather a dowdy little hat, Marthe; something that comes down over my eyes and makes me look very good and church-going."

"Yes, madame."

"And a pair of thick shoes with low heels, Marthe, and lisle-thread stockings, not silk to-day."

"Yes, madame."

In a quarter of an hour Lallie Allistone stood surveying herself with a satisfied smile. Her glass reflected a tall, rather pale-looking woman in black, with great black eyes looking out from under the brim of a severe little mushroom hat, that yet in its way had managed to cost about six times as much as it looked worth.

She was neither smart nor worldly-looking, nor chic. And yet she was elegant, and she told herself she could never be anything else.

She surveyed herself carefully. She really liked the look of herself so much that she registered a mental vow to go in for dowdy dressing.

It seemed as if she could create in it an atmosphere of elegance that was really far more delicate and refined than anything to be got out of smart chic clothes.

And then, too, the black frock, perfectly fitting though it was, was obviously not new. It suggested—

a delicate restrained kind of suggestion, of course—that Mrs. Allistone was not a wealthy woman, that she had to be careful about her frocks, that she knew how to dress and was worth dressing, but that she was sadly curtailed in her means.

And that was exactly the impression that Lallie Allistone had dressed herself to produce.

As she rang the front bell at the Hall and a footman appeared, she hid her uneasiness under a most charming smile, for she was not above smiling at domestics.

“Is Mrs. Harding at home?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A look of relief showed itself in her handsome dark eyes, and she followed the man with graceful, lazy movements to the library, where he was conducting her.

Ariadne was lying on a sofa drawn up beside a great fire, and at once Lallie Allistone noticed the difference in the girl’s looks. She was thin and white, and an air of sadness hovered about her eyes.

Moving forward with outstretched hands, Lallie cried in that low voice of hers—

“My dearest child, is it possible you have been ill?”

“Yes.”

Ariadne was rising to her feet. But Lallie forbade her to move.

“And I didn’t know anything about it,” she said. “Why ever didn’t you let me know? Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry! I can see by your face that you have been ill. You poor child, I *am* so sorry! I wonder if I ought to go away. I will, of course, if you’d rather. I didn’t know about your illness. And the man said nothing, but brought me straight in here.”

"I had given him no instructions," said Ariadne gently. "I did not tell him that I was not receiving visitors."

Lallie surveyed her sadly.

"Does that mean you didn't want to receive me?" she said, with a piteous little air. "It sounds like it, dear."

"Oh, no, no!"

"You would tell me if it were so?"

Ariadne roused herself, and the old sense of hospitality, which was deeply inbred in all the boys and girls of the careless, happy-go-lucky Manor, came sweeping over her as she began to awake to the fact that Mrs. Allistone herself was looking sad and worried, and had an air of distress branded subtly somehow even upon her clothes. And she had walked all the way from the Laurels. And it was cold and wretched out of doors. . . .

"Do come and sit by the fire, and make yourself comfortable in a nice chair," she said quickly, and then added: "I must ask you to forgive me for not answering your notes. I've been so sorry not to."

She paused.

The wily Lallie let her long, graceful body drift languidly into a huge padded chair near the blaze, and, stretching out her long white hands towards the fire, she warmed them ostentatiously in silence for a few moments.

"How delightfully comfy and luxurious you are here, my dear," she said. "Oh, how I envy you! It's so sickening to be poor. The one thing in the world that I think absolutely detestable is to have to think twice before you light a fire. And really that's how

it is with me, dear, speaking plainly as one woman to another. For somehow you are so sweet and sympathetic that I don't feel as if I can go on with all my brave little pretences before you. Oh, those pretences! How they wear one. Heart and soul they wear one. Ah, if one only dared to be absolutely a beggar, to go about in rags, to eat dry bread, how much happier one might be than in this everlasting striving to keep up appearances for the sake of those who are near and dear to one—for the sake of one's friends and one's family, to whom, of course, one always owes to make as good a figure as possible. Oh dear! Sometimes I am positively afraid to wake up in the morning, so wretched so grey and miserable does my life seem when I contemplate it in those early morning hours. I have nothing. I have not even youth. I feel myself ageing every day; next week, dear—you'll scarcely believe it, but it's a truth I assure you—I shall be thirty-one. Thirty-one! Isn't it dreadful? Isn't it ghastly? And once I was only twenty. I was so happy, so much loved. I had such a good time. I thought it would never end, and then—then I made a sad mess of it all. I married for love."

She paused, and drawing a delicate, little lace-edged handkerchief from the discreet black satin sachet in her lap, held it to her eyes for a second.

"And my marriage was a failure," she continued, finding that Ariadne did not supply the correct little sympathetic touch, and mentally dubbing her a trying little rustic.

"I am so sorry."

Ariadne found words at last. The fact was she could not think of anything to say before, except that

she was surprised to learn that Mrs. Allistone was only thirty-one. She had always thought of her as nearer fifty.

"You would be sorry if you knew all," went on Lallie darkly, flapping her handkerchief about and stretching her feet out luxuriously to the blaze. "But there! I didn't come here to talk about my troubles. They are my own. I can bear them. I'm not a woman given to going about asking my friends for comfort. 'Suffer and be strong.' That's my motto. It's about Etienne I came to see you to-day."

Ariadne grew pale.

This was what she dreaded.

"About the money," added Lallie gently. "When you disappeared like that the other day, you naughty thing," shaking a playful finger at her hostess, "I felt quite sure that you were doing your best to get that five hundred pounds, in spite of your strange disappearance and silence."

"I did try," said Ariadne, "but I could not get it."

"You couldn't get it?" echoing the words with an insolent stare.

"It was impossible. The lawyer refused."

"When?"

"That day."

"But surely you've tried again?"

The insolence in her voice was undisguised now, and Ariadne began to notice it.

"I've been ill," she said with quiet dignity.

"Oh, I see, ill. So you let the matter drop."

"I was obliged to."

"And in the meantime Etienne may be starving."

"Oh, surely not as bad as that?"

"My dear Mrs. Harding, don't let us mince matters. I happen to know that Etienne is absolutely penniless. I've been kind to him, as kind as my means will allow. After all, he is no relation of mine, he's only a friend. I would have asked him to stay on at the Laurels only that I am alone. I have no chaperon, and in spite of my thirty-one years people will refuse to look upon me as an old woman yet. But surely you and Mr. Harding, the poor boy's cousin, surely you must feel the pricking of duty towards his distress. Yes, duty. Pardon me for saying such a word to you, but there it is."

"I tried all I could," said Ariadne.

"Then you must ask Mr. Harding. He, of course, will give it to you immediately."

"Oh no, no. I cannot, I dare not ask him."

"Why not?"

"It is impossible."

She saw Edward's face as she spoke, cold, stern, impassive. She heard his voice. Those words that had been ringing in her ears ever since, "I wish to cut down our expenses."

Lallie watched her like a cat watching a mouse.

"I think you must ask him," she said slowly.

She paused and let her eyes dwell intently on her hostess's fair young face in silence for quite a moment. Every instant her determination to get that money increased a thousandfold. She was growing obsessed. She would have it. She must have it.

Thousands and thousands of pounds were lying idle in these people's bank. She was not going to be balked. She had no intention of going through all

this trouble with no result. Have the money she would and must.

And she had a trump card up her sleeve all the time, waiting for the right moment for her to play it.

And now the right moment had come !

" I have been very kind to you, Mrs. Harding," she said, and Ariadne started before the change in those usually low, sympathetic tones. " For your sake I have burdened my conscience."

" Burdened your conscience ! "

The words went echoing through the room.

All of a sudden it seemed to Ariadne as if life, which she had in her girlish heart looked upon as so fair and pure and beautiful an institution, had suddenly changed its colour and its temper ; the very sky seemed blackened ; truth, kindness, honour took wings and fled, and in their place came sweeping down a swarm of ghouls as those words of Mrs. Allistone's and all that they suggested, found their way into the girl's breast.

Blindly she put out her hands as if to ward off from her the dreadful blow, and her white face might have moved the most callous-hearted person to pity. But not Mrs. Allistone. She had lost count of every human instinct at that moment but the desire for money.

" I kept your secret," she continued, fixing her eyes on Ariadne.

" What secret do you mean ? "

Ariadne's lips were white.

Lallie broke into a low amused laugh.

" The young man whom you used to meet at all hours of the day," she went on ; " whose presence you kept a profound secret from everybody. The young man I chanced upon in my little cottage, as you will

remember. You implored me to say nothing. Against my will I promised. I have kept my promise. I have said nothing. But now I am beginning to be sadly troubled about the whole affair. I think that it's my duty to let Mr. Harding know the truth."

"What? You would tell him?"

All pretence was now swept aside by Lallie, who had arrived at the moment when subterfuge was useless and simply hindered her.

"I shall tell him," she said firmly.

"Oh, you couldn't! It would be too—too dreadful of you!"

"I should do it to save you."

"You're wrong. I need no saving. I don't know what you think—I don't dare to know what you think; but whatever it is I feel sure that it is absolutely and entirely false."

Mrs. Allistone laughed again.

"If it is false, then why do you mind your husband knowing?" She rose to her feet then. "Why—yes, why?" she repeated mockingly.

"I do not choose to tell you."

"Exactly."

"Oh, but you are wrong. You're cruel—you're wicked! How dare you insinuate things like that?"

"I insinuate nothing," said Mrs. Allistone. "I will leave the insinuations to be made by Edward Harding himself when he knows that his young and pretty wife has had clandestine meetings with a handsome young man in an empty cottage in the neighbourhood."

She moved towards the door.

She had no intention of going, but that was part of

the game, for finesse was something of which she was a past master.

"Dear Edward," she continued, in a sad, regretful voice. "He will feel it terribly. I know him so well; we were engaged once, years ago. He showed me the whole treasury of his heart in those days, and if it had not been for his absurd and insane jealousy we might have been the two most happy people in the world to-day. But there, that has nothing to do with the present question—except that I feel, as an old, old friend of Edward's, I am bound to open his eyes to his wife's behaviour."

She paused.

"Of course," she added, in low, vibrating tones, that seemed to change as if by magic, "it could be *arranged*."

"How?" fell from the other's white parched lips.

"Well, if you let me have a thousand pounds within a week or two I will keep your secret. That's how. Think it over. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXIX

“ . . . AND FIVE YOUNG CHILDREN ! ”

ON the same afternoon, at the same hour, Edward was up in London, closeted with Sir James Bond.

“ It looks bad,” said Sir James, at the end of a long talk, during which the two men had pored over a vast array of legal documents, and Edward had made certain confidences to the famous legal dignitary. “ I’m afraid it looks very, very black, my dear Harding. I’m sincerely sorry. It’s deuced hard luck,—to trust a man as you’ve trusted that wretched Arkwright, and then to find him rotten to the core, and robbing you right and left, even when he knew that you were being practically ruined by the wretched failure of those South American mines. It’s a bad business. You’ll have to prosecute the beggar without delay.”

“ He has a wife and five young children,” said Edward.

He sat there tapping the table absently with a lead-pencil, and staring drearily out through the great none-too-clean window of the lawyer’s chambers. And all the brightness and elasticity seemed to have been suddenly crushed out of his face.

“ That’s nothing to do with you,” said Sir James sharply. “ Come, come, Harding, this is no time to play the Quixote ! You must get a warrant out at once for the man’s arrest.”

Edward sighed.

"Things are much worse even than I anticipated," he said. "There's only one thing that I do hope and trust will not be affected, and that is my wife's settlement. What do you think about that, Sir James? I would rather sell my soul almost than have that shaken. For reasons of my own—private reasons—it is intensely important. I may put it to you that it is a most serious and delicate point of honour with me that nothing happens to affect that money. We must think of that first of all. That must be absolutely our leading thought in our attempts to save the situation."

Sir James looked at him sharply.

"But, my dear Harding," he said remonstratingly, "think what we could do with that money if we could lay hands on it for a little while! We might bolster things up until you tided over this ugly turn. I quite believe we could do so with the aid of that £50,000."

But Edward's face was determined, and the lawyer looking at him, knew that his mind was made up upon this point beyond all hope of changing.

"I would rather die than touch a penny of that money," he murmured.

But not so low that the lawyer did not hear him.

He became wily.

"But surely, my dear Harding, you must think of your wife in this matter from a psychological point of view as well as from a material one. You must think of her as a woman, as your helpmate, the sharer of your troubles—the woman who loves you. Surely you owe it to her to let her do what she can for you in

your hour of trial. In shutting her off from that, don't you think you may be doing her a big injustice? A woman who loves is never happier than when helping the man she cares for; and your wife is so young, so charming. And you have been married such a short time; her devotion, I am sure, would be more than equal to any strain that we might put upon it in this way. Think it over, my dear Harding. To-morrow we can come to a decision."

Edward rose to his feet.

Every word of Sir James had gone through his heart like a knife, but he steeled himself. He held out his hand, grasped the other's in a warm, friendly clasp, and said:

"Good-bye, Sir James, till to-morrow. But my decision about that settlement is absolutely irrevocable. Don't speak to me about it again."

He picked up his hat and went out alone into the rapidly gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XXX

GREY LETTER

A WEEK, and Edward was still away in London.
A week !

And in that week Ariadne had seen each day go by with a leaden sinking of her heart, for how was she to get that money for Mrs. Allistone ? How ? How ?

She racked her brains. She thought of nothing else. At night she lay awake hour after hour, picturing to herself the scene when Mrs. Allistone would tell Edward all she knew about the mysterious young man in the cottage. For she would tell. Oh, yes ! There wasn't the slightest doubt of that.

Ariadne paled and grew thin. She was a shadow now, a mere shadow of her former self. She was frightened. She began to realize how dangerously she had been playing with fire.

And yet—so she argued with herself in those long black hours of misery—and yet, in helping William she had done the only thing that seemed possible. No, no ! She sighed and breathed hard. She was sure she could not have done otherwise. It was cruel of fate to punish her like this.

She made up her mind to ask Edward as soon as he returned to let her have a thousand pounds.

She would go into no details. She would simply ask for the money. He could think what he liked.

Perhaps he would refuse. And then? What then? She dared not think what would happen if he refused.

But every day she expected him, and every day came instead a brief note saying that he was detained on business.

On the seventh day she woke with a feeling of utter desolation, almost wishing that she might never open her eyes again.

In her tired overwrought condition Edward's anger had now assumed the proportions of something monstrous, something terrible, something that never, never could be put right again.

And this was the seventh day. And yes, there was a letter. The scent of it reached her nostrils with its faint sickly-sweet perfume, a letter in a large grey linen envelope with dashing-looking writing on it.

It was from Mrs. Allistone.

"Just a line to remind you that one week is up, and so is my patience. I am in town, as you see, but I return to the Laurels next Friday for a couple of days. Do you come to me, or do I come to you?"

Ariadne's heart went out in a sudden intolerable longing for Kit O'Dowell, whose essence seemed of so rare and unworldly a quality after these harrowing earth-bound phases.

But Kit had gone to Brittany, having made eight pounds by a story, and one of her gay light-hearted letters that came about this time contained the first suggestion of her interest in Etienne Bouleran, an interest that was destined presently to have so strange an effect on the lives of Edward and Ariadne.

CHAPTER XXXI

KIT IN BRITTANY

DEAREST OF ARIADNES,—

“*Aimez-vous les haricots verts?*” says the English lady (who has come abroad for the language) to the young Frenchman next her.

“Hoh yes, very much,” he answers.

“*Vous parlez Français?*” she asks.

“Hoh yes, Madame. You spick Engleesh?”

“Yes. *Oui! oui-oui-oui!*”

What is she to do?

“Hoh yes. I haf been in England. I haf been in Dover.”

“Ah. *Oui! Oui-oui-oui! Moi, j’aime beaucoup le Français. Il est très belle—très beau* I mean. *Avez-vous lu les livres de Balzac?*”

“Hoh, you like ’im? He is very ’eavy. We do not read ’im now.”

“*Il est très bon, n’est-ce pas?*”

“Do you like Sherlock Olmes?”

“*Aimez-vous Bourget?—Paul Borget? Il est très, très bon, n’est-ce pas?*”

“Hoh, he writes very ’eavy. We do not read ’im now.”

“*Il a le style, n’est-ce pas?*”

“Hoh, I like Meredith. I haf read the *Egoist*, four times.”

She abandons herself. She is lost. A Frenchman who has read the *Egoist* four times will *never* talk aught but English to an Englishwoman.

She makes a drowning effort.

“*Aimez-vous Pierre de Coulevain ?*”

In her nervousness her French fails, and she adds : “But I do not agree when she says Englishmen propose because they drink too much champagne.”

“Pierre de Coulevain ? She Mees, she is no French, she is Swees,” with a withering curl. “Haf you read Enery James ?”

“Yes, I read him in *French*.”

She turns coldly and soothes herself with a little real French from the menu.

Through the many windows of our long bare white *salle-à-manger* lies Brittany. Huge misshapen poplars bend in strange attitudes over the flat grey-green landscape, such a tender dreaming landscape ! The champagne of the air has gone to their heads ; they are drunk, as you see at once. The grey spire of Ploubelay’s church stands up boldly from the long, low, monotonous silhouette of villages and trees on the distant sky-line. A stretch of silver water gleams palely where the sea has overswept the dunes. The endless road in glimmering white is dotted with ink-black figures of old Breton women, always in dense black, and followed always by a dull red cow. It is autumn. The “season” is all but over. Yet every one has been loth to go. Such air, such bathing, such cooking will never be found again till next year.

Across the table a woman’s voice runs on industriously.

“*Jeamie is verra metapheesical. He always was*

. . . I remember when he was four, he said to his father who was painting, 'God could paint a better picture than that!!' I remember when he was five he had a pain one day and he said to me, 'Mother, does the pain get in from outside, or does it come outside from in?'"

"Isn't that what we all want to know?" says the bass voice of the Parson's wife from Cumberland. Every one is silent. And the Parson's wife, who always reduces one to "yes" and "no" folds her hands in happy gloominess and says to the Parson, "Is this fish we're having, dear?"

Dinner goes slowly on.

"Would you eat a raw cockroach for a thousand pounds?" cried a loud voice, issuing from a large young mouth half-full of vol-au-vent. It is the metaphysical Jeamie, excited by the stories told about him.

What an awful problem to let loose among a party of men and women, who have so many problems of their own! Would *he*? Would *she*? *Raw*? And a cockroach? But then—*a thousand pounds*!

In terrible suspense and dead silence every one goes on with dinner, but between mouthfuls all find themselves confronting the metaphysical one's question. And anon it is the cockroach, and anon it is the thousand that dangles itself before their eyes.

"I ate a snail once," announces the Anglo-Indian lady's little daughter, suddenly.

"Was it raw?" cries Jeamie immensely interested.

"It was *dead*," answers Maysie.

Somehow that sounds even worse than raw.

"I wrapped it up in bread and butter and ate it quick, and it didn't taste like anything at all."

"I'll do it like that," decides the poor Poet, who has suffered most over the £1,000 and the cockroach.

"*Y mange bien*," demands a hugh Breton, appearing suddenly in the doorway. "*Y mange bien?*" He pats his stomach and stands looking amiably in. It is Monsieur *le Patron*—the proprietor—who appears like this at the door after each course and hurls the same query at us: "*Y mange bien?*"

Every one replies, "*Oui, oui, très bien*," except the French family, who want to know if there are no soles to be had, while Madame remarks it is a long time since we had lobster.

"*Et vous, Monsieur?*" The proprietor turns to the English author who sits alone at a solitary little table because he likes it. "*Y mange bien?*" he demands in a paternal manner, standing over his victim.

"*Oui, oui, très bien*," says the hapless Englishman. The proprietor than tells him, because he is alone perhaps, and very thin, a little story—about a carrier and some cider, it seems.

"Do you understand?" says the proprietor at the end.

"*Oui oui*," says the Englishman.

But the proprietor shakes his head.

"No, no. You don't understand. *Ecoutez!*"

He tells it all over again.

"Do you understand?" he asks.

The Englishman tries to go on with his haricots verts. "Yes, yes, perfectly."

But the proprietor shakes his head the more. "*Non, non . . .* You don't understand. *Ecoutez!*"

When he has told it for the third time he roars with laughter, and allows the Englishman to laugh

at last. Then he says encouragingly, "To-morrow, monsieur, there will be room for you at the big table."

"Thank you, thank you," says the Englishman. He cannot explain that he came to Brittany to be alone. Besides he knows no French. The Proprietor is sure he doesn't. He decides to leave that night. The proprietor being happy, disappears humming into the kitchen.

"What is the nicest compliment you've ever had?" says the authoress in the smart hat, to her own party, finding the conversation slipping away from her. "The one I liked best was when Lord Boodle-Boodles said I had 'the charm of a woman and the brains of a man.'"

"I was rather pleased when *The Times* said I was a Genius," says the Poet.

But what a pity! Josephine clatters dishes on the last word.

"And you?"

The authoress smiles towards the young man who makes epigrams.

It is a perilous moment for him. On one hand is the chance to reveal what beautiful things people say to him. On the other is the Epigram. He sacrifices himself. He chooses the Epigram.

"The best compliment I ever had was when some one said I could say nasty things."

"Oh! You funny boy!" And the lady in the smart hat taps him delightedly with her fan, smiles, and evidently admires him a good deal, for she is clever herself, and knows cleverness when she sees it.

"Excuse me, but is it true you are a *writer*?" the large nice lady with an automobile and a wicked

husband says timidly to the epigrammatic young man who can say nasty things. "I was told that you wrote plays."

"Yes, I have just written one for Duse."

"Oh really! I *adore* Duse."

"My last play is for Bernhardt. But I'm afraid she'll be a little old for the part."

"By the time it's played," mutters the Poet.

"I am doing one now for Mrs. Patrick Campbell," adds the epigrammatic one.

"What good actresses you choose!" says the nice lady admiringly.

And these, my dear Ariadne, are the people I've been rooting and ratting round with!

By the way, the Epigrammatic One reminds me of Etienne Bouleran.

Did I tell you I saw him in London—E. B. I mean—Yes, twice. Amusing, he is. Likeable too, maybe, if only some one would rate him soundly, and have the intelligence to say, "Stop playing the lunatic and be a man!"

Yours ever,

KIT.

CHAPTER XXXII

TRAIN SCENE

A TERRIBLE time for Edward—a time like a nightmare—every hour disclosing black and yawning pits underneath the fair green grass that had seemed to stretch out so serenely beneath his feet. Discovery after discovery came to light. Endless frauds had been perpetrated. At last the power of being shocked grew numb from sheer over-use, and the ruined defrauded man faced each new revelation with a stolidity that amazed Sir James Bond.

Arkwright, Edward's trusted right-hand man for fifteen years, had disappeared.

Search was made for him in all directions, but in vain; he could not be found. And the full significance of his disappearance was the bitterest blow of all to Edward Harding.

Now it was a matter for detectives. That had to be. But they were private detectives, Edward insisted. For the present, at any rate, he would keep the matter *sub rosa*.

If he could only get a clue to Arkwright's whereabouts he was determined he would follow him. He would go in person to the wretched man, and have an interview with him—an interview which might save Arkwright himself from penal servitude, and might effect con-

siderable mitigations in the present prospect of certain ruin for Edward.

At four-fifty on Friday afternoon a taxi-cab bowled up to Paddington Station, and out stepped Edward. He had hardly time to catch the train, and had to make a desperate rush, being almost thrown into it as it was moving, by the stationmaster, who had known him since a boy.

He seated himself in a corner by the window, and was proceeding to unfold an evening paper, when a low voice broke in upon him.

"Mr. Harding! How delightful! Are we really going to be fellow travellers all the way to Gloucester?"

Turning with a start, he saw that the only other occupant of the carriage was a lady. She was smiling and moving towards him a little.

It was Mrs. Allistone.

"How do you do?" said Edward.

Nothing stiffer than his manner could have been imagined.

"Thank you, I am very well," said Mrs. Allistone.

She laughed, that horrible little low laugh of hers, that made Edward's blood creep.

"But oh, I am so sorry for you!" she added. "You're shut up alone with me for quite an hour. No chance of escape, unless you jump out of the window. Poor you! Ah! I know very well how you're feeling—wishing me to Kingdom Come, *n'est ce pas?* Yes, yes! I know all about that. But here I am, and there are you, and as far as I'm concerned"—with an arch look—"it's quite accidental. I was first in, wasn't I? You followed, didn't you? Don't blame

me, poor martyr. I'll do my best to be as little horrid as possible."

She looked anything but horrid—that is to say, to any one's eyes but Edward's.

She was wearing a long, black, musquash coat to her ankles; an extremely short, neat, black skirt; patent leather boots, with white kid tops; a white ermine toque, and long white ermine stole.

A pink camelia was fastened coquettishly in the front of her coat, and proved delightfully becoming to her dark handsome beauty, which might have been a little tried otherwise by all the severe black and white. Chic she was to the latest degree, but to Edward she was odious.

With a man's fervour, he thanked heaven from the depths of his heart that neither his wife nor his mother was capable of dressing like that. How amused Mrs. Allistone would have been had she known!

Perhaps she guessed. She laughed a little, and tossed the long ends of her stole artistically over her left shoulder, nestling her chin down against the warm snowy whiteness, in a way which she knew a good many people found remarkably fascinating.

Edward sat bolt upright in his corner, a stern, uncompromising figure, in a rough grey overcoat and grey felt hat.

Inwardly he was furious at this encounter, for he was in anything but the right frame of mind to talk to a woman like Mrs. Allistone.

He longed for silence. His brain was full of business, and his mind's eye kept on following a very different picture from this dark, smartly-gowned siren, with her pink camelia, her musquash coat, and her

ermine toque and stole, who sat making languishing black eyes at him, while her red lips curved in half-sweet, half-malicious laughter.

He was thinking of Arkwright. He could see Arkwright all the time, and he wanted to go on thinking of him, for that was what he was rushing down to Gloucester in such a hurry for. He was rushing home to tell Ariadne that to-morrow he must start for Florence.

Arkwright was in Florence. The detectives had traced him thither.

But here was this smiling, complacent lady deliberately setting herself out for a two hours' *tête-à-tête*.

He groaned within himself, but as there was no possible way of escaping, he began to try and put the best face possible on the situation.

"Would you like a newspaper?" he said.

His tone was very courteous, but it was very cold.

For answer Lallie broke out into uncontrollable laughter.

"You are—you really are—too funny for anything, Edward!" she said. "Too absurd! Good heavens! Don't you know me better than to imagine I'd spoil my eyes with a beastly newspaper in a train? No, thank you. I'm not going to read. I'm going to talk to you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; with or without your leave."

She moved across the compartment with a lazy swaying gait, and sank indolently into the corner opposite Edward.

"That's better," she said, in low unhurried tones. "I do like talking to people opposite me, when I have

a lot to say. Now, Edward, cheer up. For Heaven's sake take that grim, glum look off your face. You know how it affects me. It's like looking at the plaster cast of somebody who's trying to be a saint, and can't quite manage it."

Edward's reply to this was silence.

But Lallie Allistone was not in the least perturbed or daunted. She had not expected him to reply. She knew him too well for that. She simply settled herself down to say cool, insulting things to him, with a mocking little smile on those scarlet lips of hers all the while.

"I'm sorry you've grown such a prig, my dear Edward," she went on. "Such a pity, I always think. But still, I saw it coming years ago. It's rather rough on other people though, on your wife for instance."

Edward was roused now.

"Kindly leave my wife out of your conversation," he said sternly.

"Shall I? Very well, poor child. She and I have been making rather friends lately; and I must say, if there is one woman in the world I am sorry for—wholly and heartily sorry for—it is poor Mrs. Edward Harding. I have seen it all from the beginning.

"Ah, it's sad! She's so young, so exquisitely lovely—so fresh and fair and sweet and winsome. It's only to be expected that she could not stand, for long, life with a prig and a plaster-saint like you, Edward dear. Her heart is a woman's, after all. When I met her with a certain young man who shall be nameless, of course I said nothing to any one. I met her again and again with him. She asked me to say nothing. I said nothing. I'm not saying anything

now, either. Not really. But I must say this to you, Edward Harding—do you think it a seemly thing that your wife should make friends with a man who shot you ? ”

* * * * *

As the cruel words fell on Edward's ears it seemed to him—tired, jaded and overstrained—that at last his own thoughts had been put in living black and white before his eyes.

So it was Etienne who had done it !

Somehow, in spite of all his suspicions, and in spite of what seemed to him like overwhelming evidence against the lad, he had always kept alive a certain secret hope that his suspicions were wrong.

So Etienne had stolen into the wood. Deliberately he had come there to shoot his cousin in cold blood because he had been refused money.

Or was there another reason ? Was it possible that even then Etienne had hated Edward because he was the husband of Ariadne ?

Was it possible that, even so far back as that, the boy had been in love with her ? Was it possible that his wild, foreign nature had led him to commit that crime—partly through love of the wife, partly through hatred of the husband ?

“ And such great friends too,” continued Mrs. Allistone ; “ devoted to each other apparently. Of course, I don't mean to insinuate anything horrid. That, of course, would be utterly impossible about so sweet and charming a woman as Mrs. Harding ! ”

Edward stifled the feeling that crept over him as the black-eyed, languid-looking Lallie sat comfortably

back in her corner, her chin nestling cosily in her white ermine stole.

He picked up a newspaper. His hands trembled. But his face was perfectly emotionless.

He would read. He would shut her out. He would forget. His eyes turned resolutely to the Parliamentary Notes, and he began reading a paragraph about Mr. Lloyd George's attack on the Lords. But the words danced before his eyes, a faint red tinge seemed to steal over the white sheets of the paper. "Mr. Lloyd George was the limit, as our American cousins say." He read that over time after time, without getting the slightest sense from it. Other words came dancing on top of those printed letters: "Such great friends, too—devoted to each other apparently. Friends with the man who shot you!" But he read on. He held the paper up before his face and sat motionless as a log in his corner. And not one word did he speak to Lallie Allistone for all the rest of the journey. Yes; Lallie had done her mischief pretty thoroughly this time.

She had meant to wound; and she had succeeded.

The train dashed into the station as the mists of evening were gathering over the soft, pastoral Gloucestershire country, with red lights twinkling cosily through the deepening darkness. In the brightness of the electric light a woman's form was seen standing on the platform, wrapped in a long fur coat, with a little fur toque on her fair hair, for the day had been bitterly cold and unseasonable.

It was Ariadne.

She had come down to the station to bring some parcels which she was sending off to Alice by the

evening's mail, and then it had occurred to her that she would wait for Edward, and drive back with him in the brougham.

It was two whole weeks since she had seen him. In her pocket was that letter of his, curtly refusing her the money she had asked for.

The light flashed in her face now, and Edward saw her from his carriage window. A feeling of amazement seized him. Why was she there? For whom was she waiting? Was it Mrs. Allistone? And had she expected Etienne to come too?

He opened the door quickly and stepped on to the platform, followed by Mrs. Allistone, who had seen Ariadne also.

Edward's first thought as he reached his wife's side was one of acute distress, for he had never seen such a change in any one in so short a space of time. There was no mistaking the wretchedness written on that fair young face. He greeted her quietly, and hid his surprise when she told him she was waiting for him.

Mrs. Allistone swooped down on them then.

"I have travelled down in the train with Mr. Harding," she said cooingly, laying a hand lightly on Edward's arm as she spoke. "It was so nice to have a man to look after me. Just like old times, Edward, wasn't it? I don't know that we ever took such a long journey as that before together, though we planned some in the old days, didn't we?"

Ariadne shrank back in dismay.

Edward, noticing her action, drew his own conclusions.

He moved quickly away, drawing his wife's hand through his arm, and remarking pointedly to her,

Edward was perfectly calm.

He had one fear, and one only.

But that was not for himself.

It was lest the man before him should attempt to blow his brains out before his eyes.

He saw at one glance the terrible change that had come over Henry Arkwright since they last met. He was hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed, unshaven, gaunt, with great black eyes that glittered as if with some inward consuming fever. His clothes were shabby, unbrushed, uncared-for, his hands even were dirty. He looked neglected, desperate, a man whose hand was against his fellows. All his former spick and span ways had disappeared, and anything more jaded and frowsy could scarcely be imagined.

Edward was shocked.

"I want to talk to you," he said again, and his voice was full of a wonderful persuasiveness.

On the table stood a bottle of gin, with a half-filled glass beside it.

"Talk then," said Arkwright.

"May I sit down?"

"Yes."

He tried to point to a chair, but his hand trembled so that he was ashamed and he sank lifelessly into his seat instead.

Edward dragged a chair over beside him. And then the two men looked at each other. A long strange glance it was between those black eyes and those blue eyes, the black ones burning with fever and despair, and full of a horrible hunted fear, and the blue ones perfectly honest, perfectly clear, and yet kind, with an almost godlike kindness and humanity.

"In God's name, why have you come here?" burst out Arkwright at last. "You of all men! Why do you put me to the torture of looking into your face, you whom I've wronged and ruined. You whom I prayed never to see on earth again! For you, of all people in the world are the one I am most afraid of. . . You are the one whose presence fills me with the most rotten humiliation. . . . I've looked into my wife's eyes. She fainted off, and was unconscious for an hour after I let her know of my defalcations. . . . Ah, it was hell, that was! And I've heard my children crying, terrified, knowing something was wrong but not knowing what . . . and I've left them . . . left them to face shame and starvation. . . . But worse than all that, Edward Harding, is to have your face looking into mine."

Edward knew he had been drinking heavily.

He leaned over and put his hand quietly on the other's arm.

"Do you know what I've come for, Arkwright?" he said.

"I can guess it," said the other sullenly, "it isn't hard to guess. You've got the police waiting downstairs, I expect."

"No, the police are not downstairs."

"You haven't brought them?"

"No."

"What have you come for?"

"I've come to save you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Arkwright, you poor fellow. I've come to save you and to get you to tell me the whole unvarnished truth, so that you can save me to a certain extent in the future."

wince in every fibre of her being. "It's not goodness on my part, that's not in it. Don't let us deceive ourselves about it."

Ariadne flashed back at that.

"Oh, I didn't suppose that you wanted me for the sake of my company," she said hotly, the scarlet dyeing her cheeks as she spoke. "I think you've shown me very plainly how distasteful that is to you. You've been a fortnight in London, though you said you would only be a day or two. Why do you want me to go with you then?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"Very well, then. I'll put it plainly. I want you to come with me so that you shall not be out of my sight. I mean, I think it's my duty to have you with me out of harm's way—and Etienne's!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY HARDING HAS HER SAY

IT was midnight. The house was sunk in profound silence, broken only by the low, sad sobbing of the winds that swept across the dark meadows and hillsides, away beyond the garden wall, and by the eerie melancholy rustling of the trees where last leaves were now falling from them under the touch of on-coming winter.

"So you're going to Italy to-morrow?" said Lady Harding.

She was standing on the Persian rug before the glowing fire, a tall, majestic-looking figure in black Chantilly lace with a broad band of black velvet pinned by a handsome diamond brooch around her neck.

Edward stood beside her, in evening dress, looking tall, and fair, and distinguished enough to please any woman's eyes; and yet his mother's glance was decidedly antagonistic.

"And I am going home to-morrow," she said in a cold, dignified voice that subtly conveyed to Edward the sense of hidden injury.

He moved nearer to her and put his arm round her.

"Dear mother," he said softly, "you have been awfully good to me. I know what it means to you to leave all those pets and charities of yours in your Norfolk village, and come and spend all this long, long

time in a house that you are no longer mistress of. I can't thank you, mother."

"I'm glad if I have been of service."

But she moved away a little, and her voice was cold.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "It is very disagreeable. But then many things have been disagreeable to me during my stay at Harding Hall. For your sake, Edward, I have suffered a great deal; I have overlooked a great deal. As you know, I wanted to go home a month ago, but you begged me to stay. You implored me to, in fact."

Edward remembered that only too well. It had been one of his futile efforts towards straightening his matrimonial tangle.

It had seemed to him that nothing could be worse for Ariadne than to be shut up alone with him, and he had hoped that the presence of the third person might have made their life pleasanter. But even that had proved a mistake. He knew it now.

"I want to speak about money," said Lady Harding.

"Money?"

Edward started with surprise.

"Yes, *money*," she repeated. "I am being very badly treated, Edward." Her voice quivered with indignation.

"By whom?"

"By you, Edward."

"Mother!"

He stared at her with startled eyes.

"One thing after another has happened," went on that cold, complaining voice. "It is very unpleasant, for instance, to have three maids suddenly dismissed without the slightest reason, as far as I can see. And I have been the sufferer. As you know, I did not

bring my own maid, Agatha, because she was laid up with a severe bout of rheumatism. I little thought how badly I should need her services."

"I'm very sorry."

Edward's expression was changing. A mask was creeping over him blotting out the pain.

"And to-day," went on his mother—"to-day is my birthday. And no one in the house has remembered it. You have always given me a cheque for a hundred pounds every birthday since your father's death. To-day you have forgotten. Ariadne has never even thought of asking if I had a birthday. Lonely, neglected, poor, here am I, at my age, suffering in a way that would make your poor father turn in his grave if he did but know. You know perfectly well how badly my speculations have turned out, and what losses I have been enduring for the last five years."

"I warned you against those speculations," said Edward mechanically.

"That's neither here nor there," said his mother, rearing her head high above the black-velvet band and the magnificent diamond brooch. "I am surprised that you should interpolate a remark of that kind just now. If I made a mistake—we all make mistakes. But you, Edward—you, my only son, are you treating me well?"

"You have made me no present for weeks—months even. And this morning what do I hear? My lawyer writes to me that the pile of bills I sent in to your lawyers to pay for me—I really didn't think it was necessary to bother you with the mention of them—your lawyer writes back and *refers me to you!* What does it mean? Why are you getting into

these habits of meanness and close-fistedness? Why are you curtailing your household expenses? What has happened to your old generous spirit? I fear that a sad change has come over your nature. You're warped; you're not the same man. Once you never thought twice about how much money you spent, and now"—she paused and snorted with indignation—"well, your poor father, when he left everything unconditionally in your hands, little dreamt that his son was going to turn out a miser. For really, Edward, that's what you're fast becoming it seems to me."

"Mother! Stop!"

"No, I must have my say. I have been suffering in silence for weeks. I see the changes in the house-keeping too. A fortnight and no champagne on the table! I asked Jones for grapes yesterday from the hothouse. I wanted to send some to my poor Agatha. What did he say? He answered me that he had had instructions to keep them for the market."

She looked into Edward's face, her large, portly figure drawn up to its full height, and a faint red spot appearing in each cheek, as her indignation mounted higher and higher.

"I *loathe* meanness!" she said vibrantly.

There was a long silence in which Edward stooped and carefully poked the fire; he added coal to it; he brushed the hearth up; his face was now entirely covered with that mask under which all that he felt was hidden.

Yet every word had gone through him like a knife. Stab, stab! His brain, his heart, his soul, all wounded were they, tortured almost beyond endurance, and there was worse to come probably.

He merely said, in answer to his mother—

“ I am sorry, mother, that I forgot your birthday. I will make you out the cheque to-morrow morning. Good-night now ! I am tired. Will you excuse me ? ”

He took her hands in his, then bent over and kissed her cheek. But there was not the slightest sign of relenting in her attitude. She was cold, hard, resentful.

“ A mean man is my pet abomination,” she said grandly, sweeping out of the room with her head held high, and her face expressive, in the most marked way, of her anger with this only son of hers.

But that was not all.

In the morning she came into Ariadne's room while the girl was dressing, and she poured out all her woes afresh, bewailing to the young wife, with a strange absence of delicacy, how badly Edward was behaving to her.

For once she seemed to throw herself on Ariadne's side. She was even sympathetic to her, seeming to invite her to a mutual confidence.

But Ariadne was dumb. Whatever she thought or felt, she resolved that not one word against her husband should pass her lips. And when Lady Harding ended the interview with a melodramatic “ My son is fast developing into a miser ! ” she kept silent.

The words rang in her ears though—rang there, and remained.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN THE MUD

BEAUTIFUL Florence was gay that day, seeming to be merry-making from end to end. Her skies were blue. Her air was flower-scented and light. Sunshine danced on the running river that passed under the bridge where Botticelli had once painted his lovely Simonetta. In the old market-place brilliant masses of the most exquisite flowers were heaped against the dark yellowy stone pillars. And in the cake-shops one could see the dashing, light-hearted Italian officers in their picturesque blue-grey coats with the great swords by their sides, eating unnumerable little cream puffs and strawberry tarts at the outrageous hour of eleven in the morning, for all the world like the gay merry-hearted children that they are.

But Edward Harding saw nothing of all this. He went hurrying along the sun-swept laughing streets, and all the while he was thinking of Arkwright. For he was going now to interview the wretched man.

As he crossed the Piazza del Duomo he pulled out his notebook, and carefully read over an address that was written there. Having satisfied himself that he was going in the right direction he passed along Via Sant' Annunziata and proceeded rapidly in the direction of Fiesole, where she slopes down into the town beneath. He went down one narrow winding street and up another. They were all incredibly tortuous and

narrow, all incredibly crowded, swarming and seething with life. Delightful black-eyed children laughed up in his face, holding their brown baby hands out for pennies because they saw that he was an Englishman, and pennies and Englishmen always went together in their shrewd little minds.

At last Edward turned up a dark, particularly evil-smelling *vicolo*, lined with rows of endlessly tall houses which seemed to reach far up into the dazzling turquoise sky above.

He stopped before the end one. The door opened. He went in, crossed the stone bare hall and began to ascend the stone staircase. Floor after floor he passed and still went upward until at last at the ninth storey he paused, examined his notebook again and then turning to the left, knocked at an unobtrusive door at the far end of a small passage. A woman opened it quickly. She drew back at the sight of the stranger. But before she could shut the door Edward had stepped past her and was in the room.

He had no need to search any further.

There before him was Arkwright himself!

"Good God! You!"

"Yes. I," said Edward. "You did not expect to see me, Arkwright."

"I know you for a man who would always follow anything out to the end," cried Arkwright. "I've seen that in you too often to deceive myself. And so now you've followed me." He laughed, a hollow, broken laugh. "Well, now you are here, what are you going to do with me?" he said, leaning his hand on the table.

"I want to talk to you."

Edward was perfectly calm.

He had one fear, and one only.

But that was not for himself.

It was lest the man before him should attempt to blow his brains out before his eyes.

He saw at one glance the terrible change that had come over Henry Arkwright since they last met. He was hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed, unshaven, gaunt, with great black eyes that glittered as if with some inward consuming fever. His clothes were shabby, unbrushed, uncared-for, his hands even were dirty. He looked neglected, desperate, a man whose hand was against his fellows. All his former spick and span ways had disappeared, and anything more jaded and frowsy could scarcely be imagined.

Edward was shocked.

"I want to talk to you," he said again, and his voice was full of a wonderful persuasiveness.

On the table stood a bottle of gin, with a half-filled glass beside it.

"Talk then," said Arkwright.

"May I sit down?"

"Yes."

He tried to point to a chair, but his hand trembled so that he was ashamed and he sank lifelessly into his seat instead.

Edward dragged a chair over beside him. And then the two men looked at each other. A long strange glance it was between those black eyes and those blue eyes, the black ones burning with fever and despair, and full of a horrible hunted fear, and the blue ones perfectly honest, perfectly clear, and yet kind, with an almost godlike kindliness and humanity.

"In God's name, why have you come here?" burst out Arkwright at last. "You of all men! Why do you put me to the torture of looking into your face, you whom I've wronged and ruined. You whom I prayed never to see on earth again! For you, of all people in the world are the one I am most afraid of. . . You are the one whose presence fills me with the most rotten humiliation. . . . I've looked into my wife's eyes. She fainted off, and was unconscious for an hour after I let her know of my defalcations. . . . Ah, it was hell, that was! And I've heard my children crying, terrified, knowing something was wrong but not knowing what . . . and I've left them . . . left them to face shame and starvation. . . . But worse than all that, Edward Harding, is to have your face looking into mine."

Edward knew he had been drinking heavily.

He leaned over and put his hand quietly on the other's arm.

"Do you know what I've come for, Arkwright?" he said.

"I can guess it," said the other sullenly, "it isn't hard to guess. You've got the police waiting downstairs, I expect."

"No, the police are not downstairs."

"You haven't brought them?"

"No."

"What have you come for?"

"I've come to save you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Arkwright, you poor fellow. I've come to save you and to get you to tell me the whole unvarnished truth, so that you can save me to a certain extent in the future."

"Save *me*? You're joking! What do you mean by saving me?"

Edward looked at him steadily.

"Of all people in the world that I know," he said quietly, "you are the one who seems to me in greatest need of saving. Doubtless there are hundreds of others—thousands probably—but, thank God, I am not acquainted with them. But you—you're some one whom I know well. You're near me. You've lived the last twenty years of your life hand in hand with all my business affairs. To your great perspicacity I owed the larger part of the fortune which I have now lost. . . . We've been almost brothers, you and I, Henry. We've trusted each other, we've liked each other, we've helped each other. . . . And now you have come a cropper, a sickening, horrible cropper. And the time when a man comes a cropper is the time when he needs a friend most."

Arkwright lifted his head, and, turning, looked into Edward's face.

"But it's you whom I've ruined," he said, in hoarse guttural tones, while a wild incredulity gathered in his eyes.

"Yes, it's me whom you've ruined, as you say. That has nothing to do with my standing by you now, Arkwright."

Edward paused.

His gaze went out in front of him in a long strange piercing glance that seemed to see away through the vast stone walls of this age-old Florentine building, away and away over the rim of the world and into some far fair sphere where the beautiful spirit of Christ reigns supreme in the hearts of men, and where those im-

memorial words, "Little children, love one another," were made the keynotes to life.

"I'm glad to have the chance," he said dreamily, almost as if speaking to himself.

Arkwright watched him like one transfixed.

There was a light shining in Edward Harding's face. He was for that divine moment face to face with his vision, and the beauty of it showed in his eyes. He had a fellow being to save, to save morally and materially. And the man in him was responding with a splendid strenuousness to the call, like a soldier before a bugle cry; and then another vision seemed to pass fleeting before his eyes, and he saw Ariadne, and the depths of his love for her were revealed at that moment as never before. Mixed with the vision of her were other beautiful gleaming desirable things—perfect love and trust . . . children . . . a home full of warmth and love and laughter . . . the future stretched out before him dazzlingly like a golden seashore beside some blue dancing tropic sea under the white light of a lightning's flash.

Suddenly Arkwright broke down and burst into low painful sobbing, leaning his arms on the table and his head down on them in an attitude of despair.

He was conquered. He had never dreamed of anything like Edward's treatment of him, and all his defiance seemed to take wings and flee away before this man's splendid humanity.

He was a wreck physically. He had been keeping up by drinking. But now he was all in a moment gone to pieces.

"Let me die!" he groaned. "I'm no good. You trusted me, and I failed you. I've been a blackguard.

For years and years I've been cheating you. I'm not worth saving."

Edward turned away for a moment to lock the door of the squalid room and quick as thought Arkwright's hand was in his pocket. He pulled a revolver out and pointed it at his own heart. Edward sprang on him with a panther-like swiftness and knocked it out of his hand just in time. The explosion pierced the window and sent masses of glass clattering noisily into the room and on to the narrow little balcony outside.

"There's no sense in that," Edward said sternly. "That's a coward's trick. Think of your wife and your young children! Come, Arkwright! Pull yourself together and be a man! Now is your chance! Seize it. Maybe all the evil courses that you have fallen into during these years have only been the means of leading you to a moment like this when you come face to face with yourself, as we all must do if we are worth anything."

He forced the trembling wretched man into the one easy chair in the room and then rang the jangling bell beside the fireplace.

The woman appeared who had opened the door to him. He put some money into her hand. He wanted some fresh milk, some new laid eggs, some bovril. With difficulty he made her understand, but at last she seemed to grasp his meaning and went off smilingly. When she was gone he built up the smouldering ashes and made a fire. He put water on to heat. He found a cup and saucer and a spoon in the adjoining kitchen and presently was able to hold a cup of steaming bovril with an egg in it to Arkwright's lips. He knew the man had been going altogether without nourishment

and that before anything could be done with him his system must be built up a little, for at present he was nothing but a helpless, shivering wreck.

Then hour after hour slipped by. Arkwright slept. Edward sat watching him.

Now and then Arkwright would wake and opening his eyes look round with a terrified look that filled Edward's heart with infinite compassion.

He kept hot milk ready and gave it to his patient at intervals. For himself he had forgotten lunch-time, and tea-time.

It was late in the day when Arkwright woke with a different look in his face. He was better. Edward saw that at once. Some of the terrible strain had passed, and he seemed like a man capable of making an effort towards recovery. He stared wistfully at Edward, and tears came into his eyes.

"I can't thank you. . . . I can't realize what you're doing for me," he stammered, getting weakly to his feet.

Edward smiled at him.

"Shall I tell you how you can thank me, Arkwright?" he said quietly, standing tall and straight in his grey tweed clothes before the other.

"How?"

"By coming with me as my guest to my hotel. . . . My wife is there. . . . I must go back to her. . . . But I cannot leave you. . . . Had I to choose between one or the other at this moment, I should have to choose to stay here with you, Arkwright. . . . But that would be very hard for my wife. . . . And hard for me, too, since I do not care to leave her alone in a foreign hotel. . . . The only alternative is that you accept

my invitation and return with me. . . . I'll see that you have perfect quiet . . . you'll not be spoken to by any one except myself . . . you shall go straight to bed in fact. . . . I'll doctor you . . . and then to-morrow after a sound night's rest and some good food, we'll go into everything. . . . I have got the books here . . . and you, if you've got any documents, bring them with you. Do you agree ? ”

One wild hopeless look the other man sent towards him.

Then his husky voice murmured in muffled broken tones, “ I'll do anything.”

Ten minutes later a carriage went bowling along with a great clatter and clash of wheel and whip over the flagged Florentine streets. Arkwright lay back in a dark corner. Edward sat silent beside him. He had waked up now to the fact that a whole day had slipped by, and it would be nine o'clock when they reached the hotel. What on earth would Ariadne think ? All he had said to her in the morning was that he was going out on business, and that he should probably not be back till tea-time. But it was long past tea-time now. Would she be frightened ? Would she be lonely ?

The carriage stopped before the great white hotel by the river, and Edward sprang out with a light buoyant footstep.

A few hasty words to the courteous manager and a room was ready for Arkwright, and he and Edward entered the lift together and went gliding upstairs. The room was next to Edward's. It was his dressing-room in fact, but they would put a bed in there immediately.

It took some little time to get everything in order

and see Arkwright safely in bed. Then Edward ordered some soup and chicken for him. Calling a man-servant he sent out for a sleeping-draught, which he knew to be harmless and very efficacious.

All the while he was thinking of Ariadne.

But he could not go and find her yet. He must get through with this first. He would not feel quite safe till he saw Arkwright had passed into slumber.

It was nearly ten before that happened.

Edward was now beginning to feel the fatigue of the long, exhausting day, following on those hours of travel and broken sleep. And he had had no food. He laughed at the thought. He would soon put that right. But first he must go to Ariadne and tell her a little of what had been happening.

CHAPTER XXXV

GONE !

HE knocked at the door of No. 35.
There was no answer.

He knocked again.

A chambermaid came along, and seeing him standing there, exclaimed loudly in her excitable Italian way—

“ The signora left a letter on her table for the signore ! ”

“ A letter ? ”

Edward felt as if some one had given him a blow.

The maid was opening the door with a key from the bunch at her side. Her black-robed figure, with its neat white cap and apron, seemed to swim mistily before Edward's eyes.

“ Is the signora out ? ” he heard his voice asking as if it were a voice from far away.

“ She's gone.”

“ *Gone !* ”

“ Si signore. She went this morning.”

The maid threw open the door.

“ She went by the train, signore. She wept. She was sad. It was as if she did not want to leave the signore without bidding him addio ; but he was out. The signore has been out all day. The signora wept and wept. Ah, poverina ! One could see that she

was in great distress. And Giovanni went to the station with her. He is my husband, Giovanni. He said she wept and wept. She was like one numbed. Poverina ! She sat in the carriage like a ghost. Oh, his heart ached for her, did my Giovanni's, and she had a long, long journey, she said. She was going far away. All the way to Inghilterra, Giovanni said."

"England ? "

"Or perhaps France," went on the maid, whose quick Florentine subtlety had swiftly grasped the fact that there was some strange domestic drama concealed beneath all this.

She advanced towards the table.

"*Ecco !* There is the signora's letter. Just as she left it."

Edward picked it up, and his eye fell on another letter lying beside it. He picked that up, too. It was also addressed to himself and in handwriting which was strangely familiar.

Like one in a dream he opened Ariadne's letter, and read her smeared, feverish words—just three.

"*This will explain.*"

What did she mean by that ?

Edward looked wildly round him, but the silent bedroom gave him no explanation.

Then he opened the other letter.

It was from Etienne Bouleran—just a few lines to say that he was leaving England hastily for he had got something to do, something splendid that would take him far away. Life was going to be different now. He was a changed man. Something had happened to change him. His cousin Edward had perhaps never realized that it was in him, Etienne, to win the love

of the most charming woman in the world, but that was indeed what had happened.

There they were in Edward's hand, the two letters, one from Ariadne, one from Etienne.

Beyond them there was nothing—nothing but a vast and terrible darkness that was bearing down on Edward Harding with all the cruelty of a nightmare.

For a long time he stood there.

He was dazed and stupefied, looking from one letter to the other. Trying to reason with himself, he found all the capillaries of his brain congested, and he was unable to finish a single thought.

Presently he got his hat and went out of the hotel. He wanted air. He found himself on the 'Lung Arno, striding with feverish steps from east to west and then back from west to east, again and again, endlessly. The river, lying all soft and clear in the warmth of the Italian night, mocked him with the thousand gleaming reflections that the lights of the great hotels along the banks were casting far and wide across the waters. And somewhere a voice was singing—a sweet, wild southern voice that went palpitating out into the warm air, mingling with the scent of heavy yellow and purple wistaria, and the green things blowing softly and silently in the vast dark gardens of the Casino.

Feverish and distorted was his vision, and it kept on imagining that meeting until he could almost visualize the feeling that had sprung up between those two. He seemed to see it dart from Etienne's breast to Ariadne's and back again. He saw it so often and it moved so swiftly that at last it took the semblance of a serpent shooting from Ariadne to Etienne and from Etienne back to Ariadne. . . .

After a long time it occurred to him that all this was unreal, and he was the victim of a nightmare.

He paused, coming to a standstill under the lights that dot the entrance to the great Cascine Gardens.

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out those letters, expecting to find that they were just a delusion. . . .

But no ! . . . this from Etienne . . . it was his handwriting . . . and this was from Ariadne . . . that was her handwriting : "*I am going away : this will explain.*"

Of the rest of the night he had no clear vision as long as he lived.

Just a vast confusion, a sense of people moving about, moving about in the darkness, of nightingales singing their hearts out in the Cascine's leafy thickets, of long rows of golden lights seeming to chain the river in its place, of warmth and flower scents and noise, the clatter of carriages, the clack of whips, the clear uplifted voices of the Florentines holding endless conversations far into the midnight, the gradual dying out of lights in the white hotels and pensions that face the river, the gradual ceasing of noises and sweeping down of a vast sweet silence through which Edward crept, as dawn broke, back to his hotel. That was all he knew of the night when Ariadne left him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

GETTING HOME TO SANDY

A BOAT-TRAIN steamed into the great barrack-like station of Charing Cross, and the roar of London sounded again in the ears of the white, exhausted-looking girl, in grey travelling coat and cap, who stepped out and went blunderingly along the platform.

Ariadne's first action was to go to the booking-office and make inquiries about the earliest train to the little village station nearest the Manor. Her voice was thin and weary as she put her questions, but the feverish excitement upheld her still for she was getting home to Sandy.

To her dismay, she learned that there was no train for three hours.

She almost burst into tears at the news.

Three hours! It seemed like three centuries. Three hours in this tired, travel-stained condition waiting for news! How was she to pass them?

. . . And all the while she could see the shabby bedroom whose lattice windows looked out towards the pond where the boys had fished so gaily for frogs and tadpoles and the various odd little fishes so dear to all boyish hearts; she could see the pond; she could see the willows beyond; she could see the ivy clinging about the lattice window; she could see the old-

fashioned sprawling wall-paper, scribbled over in lots of places with lead-pencil drawings from Sandy's naughty fingers ; she could see every detail of the room ; even the hole in the carpet where the boys had spilt the acid that famous day when their eyebrows had all disappeared to the consternation and horror of Mary Anne and Alice and Ariadne. Memories, memories—they left her alone not for a moment.

She went into the refreshment-room and had a cup of tea, but she left her sandwich untouched, although she had eaten nothing for many hours. She was too frightened to sit still. And food was impossible. It choked her.

All she wanted was to be passing up the narrow winding staircase of the Manor—to be looking into Sandy's eyes—to know that he was alive still—that death had not taken him before she saw him once more.

She wandered out on to the platform again, looked at her watch, and found that only ten minutes had passed.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her.

She might drive over to Edward's house in Grosvenor Square and refresh herself with a wash and brush.

She would kill time that way ; and to kill time was the most desired-for thing in the world just then.

As she drove along she dimly remembered that it was a long time since Edward had spoken of his house in town. And what was it he had said ? The words came back to her suddenly, strangely. They had passed almost unnoticed at the time, for she was occupied with many troubles then.

Edward had said—or did she dream it ?—when he

spoke of retrenchment, that perhaps they would not be going up to town for a long time.

She rang the bell of the great grey mansion, standing back in its small, bare dreary garden. A butler opened the door. He was a stranger; he did not recognize her.

He looked surprised.

The house had been let a fortnight ago to Lady Constance Fox, and her ladyship intended to remain there at present.

What did it mean? "

But she was too tired and jaded to think. Her brain was like pulp, only in a vague way she remembered Lady Harding's indignant manner as she discussed Edward's conduct and denounced him as mean. Was it part of his meanness, this letting the house in town?

She got into her taxicab, and ordered the man to drive her through the Park, and then across to Paddington Station.

CHAPTER XXXVII

“ POOR OLD SANDY ! ”

IT was like a dream to be back at the Manor, to see Mary Ann's homely face smiling, and Fat Girl, and all of them gathering round her when her fly at the end of the drive stopped at the dear, beloved old front door, the very sight of which somehow made her heart swell and melt.

She fell into her father's arms, and a beautiful feeling of rest seemed to surge over her suddenly, and there was Fat Girl's little soft, moist face against hers, covering her with kisses, while the Curt-Bird threw his arms round her neck and gave her a great hug.

“ How is he ? ”

“ Very bad,” muttered Dad ; and the girl saw with shocked eyes how old and wretched-looking her father had grown.

“ He's asleep now,” whispered the Curt-Bird. “ He's been asking for you over and over again. He kept saying ‘ Where is Ariadne ? I would like to see Ariadne.’ And sometimes, when he was delirious, he talked about how you and he went birds'-nesting, and the time you fell in the creek and he fished you out. Long, long ago it was, but he seems to think it was now. Poor old Sandy ! ”

She looked wildly at them.

“ What is the matter with him ? ”

“Pneumonia.”

They went into the schoolroom, where a great fire was leaping merrily in the fireplace. The lesson books, shabby and dog-eared and badly mutilated in many cases, lay about in their old familiar disorder on the shelves and tables; the well-worn Collard & Collard was shut at the far end of the room, but the same old familiar mass of hopelessly-entangled music was scattered over its top.

The memory swept over Ariadne of the day she and Alice had sat there, and she had first heard of Alice's unhappiness.

And Alice was married now to William—thank God for that!—and they were away at Bordighiera, where the invalid was gradually creeping back to health; and she, Ariadne was Edward's wife!

She leaned back in the great, low, chintz-covered chair which had long since parted with the last pretensions to springs, and now swooped down underneath almost to the floor. Fat Girl nestled on the arm of the chair, stroking her grey toque with chubby fingers. The others gathered about her; all seemed waiting for something.

Mary Ann came in with a tray, and on it gleamed the homely teacups that stole back into Ariadne's heart just as everything else was doing, filling her with an emotion that was half joy, half pain.

They drank some tea, they ate some bread-and-butter. They had healthy appetites, these boys and girls, even though Death might be waiting upstairs for one of them. The doctor was there now, and the nurse.

Quietness had been asked for; the sleep that Sandy

had fallen into would perhaps pull him through the crisis.

All this Ariadne heard as she lay back in the broken, springless armchair.

* * * * *

Presently her father sent the others away. He wanted to talk to Ariadne alone.

He leaned over and stroked her head.

"My poor girl," he said, in a quavering voice into which age had crept as it had crept into all the rest of him. "My poor darling. I see how he has changed you. My heart aches for you, child. If he has treated you as he has treated me, I know how you must have suffered. The blood of a St. John could scarcely be expected to endure things like that."

"What do you mean? Who are you talking about?"

"Of your husband, Ariadne—of your husband, poor child."

She stared at him speechlessly.

"Your poor old father understands."

"Understands what?"

"What you must have suffered."

"Suffered?"

She repeated the word after him dully, lifelessly almost.

"I little dreamed the sort of man he was. I never was so mistaken in any one in all my life."

He pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose hard with several loud trumpet-like sounds that Ariadne knew were a sort of cloak to the tears in his weak old eyes.

Then he opened his pocket-book and drew a letter out.

“ Read that ! ”

Ariadne took it in her trembling hand.

“ DEAR MR. ST. JOHN,—I regret that I am unable to comply with your request for a loan of £500.—Yours sincerely,

“ EDWARD HARDING.”

“ And I had told him what terrible straits I was in,” went on the man who had wasted two fortunes with the air of a prince in his day. “ It’s dreadful that a man should treat his poor old father-in-law as Edward has treated me.”

Ariadne’s voice came trembling towards him.

“ Dad, tell me. I know so little about business and things of that kind. Edward is a very rich man, isn’t he ? Not just ordinarily rich, but really rich— isn’t it so ? ”

“ My dear child, surely you know that by this time ? He is enormously wealthy. It would not cost him as much as it costs me to spend threepence if he were to endow me and all my children with a handsome fortune. He wouldn’t feel it. He wouldn’t know he had done it.”

Ariadne lay back in her chair and shut her eyes.

Those words of Lady Harding’s ran in her ears :

“ My son is fast developing into a miser.”

Was it possible then that the mother was right ? That meanness was at the bottom of all Edward’s economies ?

He was a rich man. He had more than enough.

Why should he wound his mother in that way ? Why should he offend her poor old dad ? Why should he have refused her the money that after all would have been taken out of her own settlement ?

And the selling of the grapes, what could that be but meanness ? And the letting of the house in Grosvenor Square when he knew she had been looking forward to a winter season in town, filled with theatres and dinners and dances.

Why had he even curtailed the domestics ? Why was there a queer look—she recalled it now vividly—in his face when the subject of money was broached, even ever so incidentally ?

Her father blew his nose again, that loud trumpet-like blow.

" That's all nothing," he said, in a quavering voice, " beside the blow to poor dear Sandy. He promised the boy should go to Harrow at Christmas, and last week he wrote to him himself and told him that he was not sure now ; that there might be delays, that he had better not count on going."

A shocked exclamation broke from Ariadne.

" The boy took the letter, he read it, he showed it to me. He said, ' Look at that, dad ! And oh, I'm so disappointed ! I wish I'd never even thought that I was going ! ' That night he went out for a long tramp in the rain, to try to forget, I expect. He got wet through. In the morning he had a high temperature and was in great pain, and now—now he's up there like that. . . ."

Ariadne rose to her feet ; white and trembling, she stood there steadying herself with her hands on the chair.

Then all of a sudden it flashed over her how tired she was, how she craved for rest, for a hot bath, for the careful attentions of a maid. But nobody seemed to think about that at all. A vivid gleam of memory flashed across her, making her heart ache bitterly. She missed Edward's little kindly attentions, and that was the truth of it. No matter what happened, Edward never forgot to notice if she was tired, for physical suffering in man, woman or child was something that Edward Harding's heart always responded to. The earth seemed rocking up and down. The fire had a strange one-sided look. Through the windows of the schoolroom the bare trees of the gardens without appeared to dance to a slow and sickening measure.

Ariadne opened her bag, remembering that her smelling-salts were there. But as she fumbled, a little yellow envelope came to light. She stared at it, and taking it out examined it incredulously. "Come at once. Sandy dangerously ill," she read. It was the telegram she had received in Florence—the telegram she had told Edward she was enclosing in her note to him when she wrote "*This will explain.*"

But her brain was numb from grief and want of sleep, and there was the nurse at the door, waiting to take her up to Sandy's room. . . .

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HUSH !

HUSH !

In the bare drear winter garden no birds must sing to-day ; no glad young voice of boy or girl must raise itself above a whisper ; no one must laugh ; and it seems as if Nature herself knows this, for her skies are all draped in sad greys, and the wind is cold and has a low moaning note in it, full of strange melancholy, and snow falls on the far-stretching moors, blotting out with a gentle but unfaltering hand all that was left of greenness ; there is no sunrise ; the darkness of night simply gives way to a sickly pallid light that makes things dimly visible but does no more than that ; the village folk go about shivering ; the warm breath of the cattle in the frozen meadows strays out across the icy air, like smoke from some fire that burns without a flame ; all the world is desolate, songless, laughterless, grey ; and at the Manor there is no one who would have it otherwise.

For Sandy is dying.

Alice has arrived, white-faced and sad, torn so ruthlessly from her happiness by that little cruel telegram. She has come without William, for the doctors refused consent to his travelling.

Over the house, usually so gay with fresh young laughter and noise, hangs the silence of Death.

This first coming of the Dread Messenger, how terrible, how unrealizable it is !

They all look at each other, Alice, Ariadne, Curt-Bird, Dad, Jocelyn, Fat Girl. Their eyes are full of dumb terror ; no one says a word ; they cling together in the little bedroom at the top of the stairs, next to Sandy's ; they are waiting, waiting, waiting to be called.

That Death should come to one of them is something that not one of them had ever believed. In the insolent certainty of their wonderful young strength and freshness it had seemed to them that Death was nothing but a myth, a bogey, a monstrous invention of some grown-up brain ; that Death should step in through their portal, should creep up through their stairs, should pause at the doorway of one of their own untidy, happy-go-lucky bedrooms, should bend over the pillow where one of them lay sleeping, should stretch out his cold harsh hand to one of them and say, " I have come for you. You must come with me. Your time at the Manor was only a brief period, and now you must leave it for ever. You who believed that this was your real home, that you could stay here for ever or until you chose to go, now you must come with me to the graveyard and there you shall lie beneath the age-old yews until the Last Trump sounds and the sleepers in the graves are awakened to immortality," that Death should say this to one of these children was inconceivable.

And yet in the next room Death is saying it even now.

Jocelyn is crying against Alice's shoulder ; Ariadne and a little sister huddle together in a big chair,

weeping with their arms round each other ; Dad sits on the edge of the bed ; the Curt-Bird stands alone at the window, staring out into the winter landscape with eyes that see nothing. . . .

A nurse appears at the door.

“ Will you come ? ” she says.

They start, and their wet faces turn towards her, full of an unutterable pathos that melts the heart of this woman who has seen so much of sickness and of death, but who has never seen a family of boys and girls knitted in closer bonds than these St. Johns of the Manor.

One by one they steal across the corridor, where the ivy is tapping noiselessly at the lattice window, and they all go in and gather about the dying boy's bed.

He is conscious now.

For the first time since Ariadne came, he knows her, and a smile lights up his little drawn thin face. She bends over him. She lays her lips to his cheek in a feverish hopeless impassioned kiss, and his hot hands cling for a moment in a spasmodic clutch about hers.

“ Old girl,” he whispers.

She tries to say something—anything—but no words come. And then his eyes go past her. He looks beyond her. She sees the searching expression on his face as though he were looking for some one. And then his voice—such a poor frail ghost of a voice, after those old loud strident Sandy tones—comes to her, “ Edward . . . where is Edward . . . ? ”

“ He isn't here, darling,” whispers Ariadne.

He doesn't seem to hear her.

“ Where's Edward ? ” he repeats, looking across the room again with that strange wide melancholy stare

that seems as if it cannot, absolutely cannot, belong to the Sandy whose eyes were so bright, so merry, so full of all glad young things.

"He couldn't come, darling Sandy," Ariadne whispers again, her heart torn by the boy's query.

"Couldn't he? . . . Oh I'm sorry . . . I wanted to see Edward . . . I wanted to . . . to talk to him . . . about—about Harrow . . . He said he was going to send me to Harrow, Ariadne . . . that would have been simply ripping . . ." The feeble voice can scarcely get round the words, and a cough seizes him just then, and the nurse comes hurriedly and bending over him holds a mixture to his lips.

Then he grows silent. Such a silence. His head turns away from his brothers and sisters. He seems to sleep. The moments tick, tick, tick themselves away. Alice, the eldest, who had mothered them all, stands with her arms round her two brothers, trying to comfort their poor little hearts though her own is breaking. Nobody speaks. Nobody stirs. Away across the room, as across a desert, they see the grey-haired doctor doing something with some bottles; they try to realize that this is Sandy's room, but it looks so different to-day; a strange order and tidiness prevails; the very flowers that sprawl across the cream wall paper seem to have lost their old-time brightness and hilarity, seem to have grown sober, staid, seem to droop and to change their colour; no tennis shoes, no muddy football boots, lie about on the floor; no torn jerseys, no mud-begrimed little trousers, no gaping socks are to be seen, tossed in careless disorder over chairs, or bed, or floor; no wild confusion on the dressing-table of string and hair-brushes, and animals

in bottles, and birds' nests and mysterious pieces of stone that only a boy's heart knows the meaning of, and stumps and old batting-gloves, and a prayer-book perhaps and a hymn-book, and Caesar's *Bello Gallico*, and a lump of toffee and some boot-black and a mass of ties ; none of these things ; but instead, utter neatness everywhere, except where those great pencil scrawls on the wall record various enigmatic drawings of members of the household, done by Sandy in some moment of ire, judging by the uncomplimentary names he has scribbled underneath them.

" I did so want to go to Harrow ! "

The weak voice from the bed makes them all start. They draw closer. Dad sits at the side of the bed, and bends down over this eldest son of his who alas !—or is it perhaps not mercifully ?—will never live to tread in his father's shoes.

" When you get well, Sandy, old boy," he says pitifully, " we'll manage that all right about Harrow . . . don't you worry about that . . . Dad will fix it all up. . . . Don't think about it now, old man . . . it'll only make your cough worse . . . and it frightens us all, don't you see, when your cough gets bad, dear old chap."

But Sandy makes no answer.

His head drifts sideways again into the pillow, and his weak thin arms stretch themselves out feebly over his face and he lies there silent, motionless . . . The nurse whispers to them to kiss him. . . .

One by one their warm young lips touch that strange forehead half hidden under those worn thin arms. . . . He never moves. . . . He does not speak . . . the silence deepens, deepens, deepens. What light there

was on the garden beyond the windows dies away. And then, as in a dream they know that the nurse and the doctor are gently getting them from the room. . . . Sandy has fled—fled on that brief dreamless sleep “Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves.”

But no one can realize it yet.

For Death holds that vast sweet kindness in its coming and going ; it dulls our brains and dims our senses ; it does not let our poor torn human hearts realize all at once when it has come and gone.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SLEEP-TIME

NIGHT now.

Ariadne lay sleepless in her own little chamber watching with staring eyes the endless hours creep by. And all the while in the darkness she heard that voice . . . It went on and on . . . monotonous, eternal . . . "I did so want to go to Harrow!" . . . It was Sandy's voice . . . Sandy's voice that would never be heard again. And those were his last words. "I did so want to go to Harrow."

The appalling sadness of it seemed to increase and gather intensity every moment as the girl lay weeping in the darkness, pondering wretchedly on that and many things.

Why had Edward not wired in answer to her wire? Why had he not come? Why had he remained silent in the face of this unutterable sorrow? Not even a word had come from him. And she had wired three times. The first time was immediately after her discovery of the telegram which she had so stupidly forgotten to leave behind in Florence; the second was on the evening of the same day when the doctors looked graver and graver; the third was on the following morning, at the same time as the wire to Alice. And Alice had come. Alice had come post-haste, leaving even her invalid love to whom she had been so short a time

united, and about whom Death seemed to be hovering menacingly still.

But Edward had remained silent.

It seemed to Ariadne that something monstrous and incomprehensible was rising out of life and swooping down upon her as if to drive for ever all gladness out of her heart.

“ I did so want to go to Harrow ! ”

How was she all her life through to forget those words and what lay behind them, for the one who had promised to send the boy to Harrow and could have done it so easily, and should have done it, having once made that promise to a child, was Edward, her own husband.

The misery of it !

How was she ever to forget it ?

She tossed from side to side, and at last she got up and slipped into a warm wrapper, and looked at the clock to see what time it was. It was only three.

She sighed. So many, many hours before dawn would come.

She was cold, too. The fire in her grate was quite out, and that chilliest hour of all the night was turning her room into an ice-house.

A memory darted across her brain.

Another midnight vigil rose before her. . . . That night when she was ill at Harding Hall, and Edward had sat up watching over her. . . . She had waked in the midnight, in the silence of the sleep-time, to find him sitting there . . . a warm fire was burning in her grate . . . she remembered how cosily, luxuriantly, the red flames had leaped and mirrored themselves on the shining silver of her dressing-table, and glowed softly on her warm

rose-pink carpet . . . she remembered the feeling of strange happiness that had come over her when Edward heated the milk for her and held it to her lips with that protective air . . . she remembered how kind his eyes had been . . . she remembered the howling of the winds outside in the tall elms and the little larches . . . she remembered their talk . . . it had seemed to her that she had seen right into Edward's soul and it had been a splendid manly tender soul, full of kindness and compassion, instinct with that beautiful feeling that Turgieneff considered the true attitude to life, pity for every one who draws breath . . . Yes, she had *known* that he was gentle, tender, kindly, underneath all his stern exterior . . . she had never doubted it somehow . . . and gradually, but surely, so surely, she had been learning to love him for these very qualities.

And now!

Up and down the room she paced, a tall white, slender form in a long cream cashmere wrapper, with her warm hair hanging in two heavy plaits far below her waist.

And now it seemed that she had been mistaken all the time.

Edward was neither really kind, nor tender, nor compassionate.

He was hard, mercenary—miserly even.

She shuddered at the thought, and tried wildly to reason out a case in favour of the absent one.

But then her father's talk with her came back to her, and she saw again that curt, cold letter of Edward's, refusing the poor old man the loan of five hundred pounds.

In her heart of hearts the girl—though she was far too loyal even to hint this to her father—wished passionately that he had never asked Edward for the money. But she saw no excuse for Edward's not giving it to him. She knew nothing of business. She had no idea whatever of the value of money. Five hundred pounds seemed enormous, but then Mrs. Allistone had asked for five hundred pounds and later for a thousand pounds, so evidently people did not think that this amount was anything out of the way large. And as for Edward, he was a millionaire. It was nothing to him. Dad had said so and Dad knew.

The door opened softly, and a tall, slender, girlish figure came creeping in. It was Alice, wrapped in a faded and rather tattered old dressing-gown which Ariadne recognized as one of Dad's.

"I saw the light under your door, dear," said a trembling voice. "I couldn't sleep. It's so dreadful. I thought I would come in."

The flickering candle-light fell on the pale faces of the two sisters, and played in ghostly eerie way about the room.

"I couldn't sleep either," said Ariadne. "Let us sit and talk . . . my fire is out, but we'll wrap ourselves in rugs . . . surely it'll have to be morning soon."

But Alice, more practical than that, went to the fireplace and quickly gathering together a handful of wood chips started a fire with an old newspaper, and presently its cheerful blaze leapt forth . . . Again Ariadne saw that picture of Edward bending over the fire—her fire.

They seated themselves on a little sofa which they

drew close to the fire now burning up beautifully, and the younger girl sank her head wearily on her elder sister's shoulder . . .

"Surely, oh surely, it's all a bad dream, Alice . . . Surely it can't be true . . . It can't be . . . I keep on saying to myself, Alice, that Sandy died this evening—last evening I mean—that Sandy died—but I can't believe it . . . I can't believe that he's lying in there, cold and stiff, and silent for ever." She broke into wild weeping, and Alice's arms clung round her, clasping her soothingly.

"All we can think," said Alice's sweet clear voice, "is that our poor darling is happier where he is now. . . . Let us think that, Ariadne, let us say it to ourselves over and over again."

She paused, and her hand pressed Ariadne's hair. She was struggling with some secret emotion.

"Ariadne, what did he mean by saying that about Harrow? . . . His last words were 'I did so want to go to Harrow' . . . I knew that . . . we all knew that . . . Why did Edward change his mind?"

"I don't know."

Hopelessly, Ariadne's answer came trembling out into the silence of the firelit bedroom, with its cream matting floor and simple dimity hangings and little girlish white bed in the corner.

"Didn't Edward speak of it to you?"

"No."

"How strange. How very, very strange." Alice paused again and hesitated.

Again she was struggling with some secret feeling.

"And Edward let you come alone," she added presently. "Wasn't he able to come with you?"

"He was out when the telegram came. I started without waiting for him. He knew nothing about it till I wired him after my arrival here."

"He must have been terribly shocked, wasn't he?"

Ariadne made no answer.

"He wired to you at once, I suppose," said Alice. "Of course he wired to say why he could not come."

Still Ariadne was silent.

"Perhaps he is coming," continued Alice's clear troubled voice, that seemed to be feeling its way through the tangled and vexed place with infinite delicacy, because the tangled place was within her own sister's heart.

At last Ariadne spoke.

"Alice!" she trembled. "I'll tell you the truth."

"No, no, please don't . . . don't tell me if it hurts you . . . Don't tell me if it's anything you oughtn't to . . . Remember I have a husband now . . . I know how we married women feel . . . I know how it would hurt me, torture me to have to say a word against William even in defence of him, which would seem to me to be almost the same thing as criticizing him. Don't tell me, don't say anything." Alice stroked her sister's hair tenderly, with that light infinitely gentle touch that took the girl back to her childhood, when Big Sister used to do her hair for her.

"I want to tell you," she said slowly. Raising herself she sat upright, her hands clasped themselves on her knees, her grey eyes stared wildly, desperately, in front of her into the leaping fire. She was very beautiful in her careless negligée with her thick hair hanging down that long straight back of hers, and her

white throat rising out of the snowy dainty frills of the night-gown and the warm cream wrapper, like a lily. But grief was graven about her lips. The sadness written there was so deep that it seemed as if it could never be erased.

"Edward has never answered my wire," she began, commanding her voice with a tremendous effort, and speaking in low hushed tones that were hoarse with tears. "He's ignored it utterly. He's taken no notice of my departure. He's taken no notice of Sandy's illness. I might be dead for all he cares. I've wired to him time after time. I've written too, a long letter. He makes no answer to anything. He does not come. He does not mean to come."

"Have you quarrelled?"

Alice's arms went out towards her pitifully, and then fell empty at her sides.

"Have you quarrelled?" she repeated, in a low voice.

"No. But he's never taken the slightest notice of me since I left Florence. And why? I ask myself again and again, why? Why did he treat poor little Sandy like that?" Her voice rose. "Why did he promise him Harrow and then go back on his word . . . It killed Sandy, that did. Yes, that was what killed him . . ." The tears were streaming down her face . . . "He went out that night in the rain, and he got wet through . . . It was all because of Edward's letter, hinting that he might not go to Harrow . . . And what would it have cost him . . . After all, how much money would it have meant to Edward . . . from first to last about a thousand pounds, Dad says . . . and what's that to him? . . . He has so many, many

thousands . . . Oh Alice, Alice ! My heart is breaking. I can't bear it, really I can't. It's ghastly, it's unendurable to think that I am married to a man who cares so much about money as all that ! ”

CHAPTER XL

AFTERWARDS

ALICE was gone now, and gradually the Manor was beginning to steal back into some of its old-time ways, but there was a change that never could be altered—some one had gone who never could return, and the hush of his going hung about the household still.

The shock of Sandy's death had made an old man of Alexander St. John, and Ariadne's heart ached as she saw her father in his worn dressing-gown, sitting hour after hour in the broken-down old chair by the schoolroom fire, staring vacantly into the flames and occasionally wiping his eyes when he thought no one was looking.

He said to her one day so pitifully—

“They could have taken anything if they had only left me Sandy!”

His bitterness against Edward increased as the days went on, instead of lessening. Again and again he went back to Edward's refusal to lend him that money. Again and again Edward's curt note was brought out of his pocket-book and read, and given to Ariadne to read until she knew the words by heart. But little did Ariadne guess how often her father had asked for money before. Little did she dream that Edward had helped him over and over again. Little could she suspect that the very curtness of that note of Edward's

had served as a cloak to the writer's feelings, and that he had really been on the verge of saying, "Your note asking me for a *further* loan of £500!"

She knew nothing of all that.

All she knew was that her father was an old and broken-down man, and that Sandy was dead, and that in some dreadful way Edward seemed to be responsible for it all; for if he had acted differently, if he had only been generous and done what he had promised, Sandy might have been alive to-day, and Dad might have been in good health and spirits. She knew, too, that Alice felt everything very deeply, considering herself the cause of Ariadne's marriage with Edward; but she—Ariadne,—took all the blame on her own shoulders. It was she who had married Edward, and it was because he was the husband of a St. John that all this trouble had come about. It was she who was the responsible one.

Somehow the Manor seemed a different place since her return, and often she found herself wondering at the incomprehensible longing for its shabby chairs and tables that had been wont sometimes to come stealing over her at Harding Hall. Far away up there in Gloucester, in the early months of her life with Edward she had often been attacked, with sharp twinging visions of the dear old drawing-room at home, and its chairs had seemed to offer her a quite extraordinary degree of peace and tenderness when her heart had been racked with Lady Harding's harshness, with Edward's coldness, and the tangle that had sprung up about them both. But now a veil seemed to have fallen from her eyes and she saw everything without sentiment, without illusion.

Going down to the drawing-room one morning, she experienced a feeling of disgust at the rank untidiness she found there.

She rang sharply and Mary Ann appeared.

"When was this room dusted last?" she demanded.

"Why, it's always being dusted!" said Mary Ann aggrievedly.

Mary Ann herself looked as if a dust would do her no harm either, for her face was covered with smuts, and her hands were as though she had been using them as hoes; she wore a dirty blue overall, torn right across the front of the bodice, and a pair of boots through which her stockinged feet were peeping, revealing the fact that the holes in the ends of her stockings were even more aggressive than those in her boots.

"And you, Mary Ann," said Ariadne as gently as she could, "don't you think you might make yourself a little tidier?"

"Tidier?"

Mary Ann tossed her head.

"Sure, Miss Ariadne, if you'd all the work on your shoulders that I've got on mine you wouldn't be talking of tidying at this hour of the morning. Why, it's not gone twelve yet! I never heard of anybody being expected to be dressed before tea-time."

A sudden recollection of the trim maids at the Hall went through Ariadne's brain and accompanying the memory, driving it deeper and deeper into her brain as it were, was a fierce pang.

"Bring me a duster, Mary Ann," she said hurriedly. "You may go. I'll see to the room myself."

"Sure, what's wrong with the room?" said Mary Ann in genuine amazement.

She went away grumbling under her breath, and Ariadne set herself sternly to work. She had scarcely believed it possible that such hideous untidiness could have gone on in any decent household. And yet she—she herself—had once dwelt in the midst of all this disorder and neglect, though she had never realized until this moment what her marriage with Edward had taken her away from.

She fastened a grey print overall over her black frock, and resolutely attacked the music which looked as if it had never been touched since the year one, but as she worked amongst those torn dilapidated sheets her mood changed, and instead of disgust came sorrow, and tears welled from her eyes and went dropping on the torn covers of Beethoven's Sonatas, "Zampa," "Myosotis," "Erin on the Rhine," "Sweet Dreamland Faces," "The Midshipmite," for all that pile was speaking to her of her childhood, of the mother who had slipped so gently and easily out of life which had never been too kind to her, poor tender soul, and of the red-haired, freckled boy, whose hands had gone stumbling through so many of these pieces.

"Ariadne!" cried a voice from the door.

The bent slim figure in the black dress and grey overall who was seated on the carpet surrounded by an overwhelming medley of music, looked up and saw standing in the doorway no less a person than Kit O'Dowell!

Next moment the two friends were in each other's arms.

They sat on the sofa presently, side by side, Kit holding both Ariadne's hands in both her own.

"It's the one thing that's never touched us yet,"

Kit said in a breaking voice. "Just the only one thing! We O'Dowells have been hit by pretty well every missile that Fate could think of when he wants to be real nasty to a family. But not Death! Thank God, Death has let us alone till now."

"Death is different from everything else," said Ariadne.

"But anyway, Ariadne," said Kit presently, "it has come and gone. You don't feel it hanging over you any longer."

"But Sandy's gone too!" said Ariadne, pitifully. And to that Kit could find nothing to say.

She just sat there holding Ariadne's hand very tight, and occasionally wiping the tears out of those straight-lashed eyes of hers.

"Let's go out in the garden," said Kit presently.

"Oh, no, not the garden!" said Ariadne. "I—I can't bear the garden now."

"Then let me help you to finish tidying the music," said Kit. "Dear me! It looks as if it belonged to the O'Dowells. Now I understand, Ariadne, the secret tie that exists between you and me!"

Her bright, gay sprit came flashing out and gradually she began to draw Ariadne from her overwhelming mood of sorrow and unrest.

"Ariadne dear, don't think me a pig," she said suddenly, when the last piece of music had been tidied into its place and the drawing-room had been dusted from end to end, and vases and jars had been emptied of incredible collections of rubbish that appeared to have been hoarding there indefinitely—bits of torn letters, broken china, string, ends of candles, half burnt cigarettes, and above and beyond all, bills—

"don't think me a pig, when I tell you that I'm most frightfully and ridiculously happy!"

"Are you, Kit? I'm glad somebody's happy," said Ariadne listlessly.

"But my happiness is different from anybody else's," went on Kit, "quite, quite different. It bears no relation whatever to the happiness of anybody that ever was or ever will be. It's just mine! My own. Come, Ariadne, arn't you feeling curious? Don't you see I'm *blushing*?"

"Good gracious! Why, so you are!"

"And you've never seen me do it before!"

"Why, Kit—what does it mean?"

"Really Ariadne, you're the most aggravating young person that ever was known. There you sit and stare with those great eyes of yours, and instead of helping me out with a few gentle subtle little suggestions, you simply reduce me to rank shamefacedness by your hard matter-of-fact questions!"

But Kit was smiling, a sweet, if crooked, smile, and as she spoke she was holding Ariadne's left hand rather nervously between her own thin little fingers.

"Well, as you won't help me out I suppose I'll have to say it myself," she went on hurriedly. "It's the usual thing, Ariadne. I'm in love!"

"*Really!*"

Ariadne sat up suddenly.

"And he's in love with me!" Kit flung out.

"*Really!*"

Ariadne, leaning forward with parted lips and dilated eyes, was drinking in every change of Kit's expression.

"Yes, really!" laughed back Kit, giving the hand

she was holding a sharp little shake. "Evidently it seems very strange to you. I assure you it's equally strange to me!"

"But who is it, Kit?"

"Ah, at last you're beginning to take an intelligent interest. You're behaving like a human being and a woman! Well Ariadne, I'll give you three guesses."

"But do I know him?"

"Yes."

Ariadne gave a sudden start, her brows contracted, and over her face swept a strange quiver.

"It—it isn't *Edward*!"

"Edward!"

Speechless for a moment Kit stared back at her, amazement giving place to indignation, and indignation finally being routed by Kit's rampant sense of humour.

"Well of all the wives I've known!" she cried, going off into peals of laughter that sent happy trembles through the flowers that she and Ariadne had so lately arranged about the room, and stealing outwards down the hall reached Mary Ann and the other servants in the kitchen, and brought a relieved sense of happiness and sunshine to the over-clouded household.

Ariadne, scarlet now, could have bitten out her tongue.

"It slipped out—" she stammered incoherently. "I—I didn't mean it of course. It was only a slip of the tongue."

"Well, the tongue didn't slip quite far enough," said Kit when she could speak.

"Oh Kit, how maddening you are! I refuse to guess again."

"Yes, I think you'd better not," said Kit. "I'll

tell you. It isn't Edward exactly. But your guess isn't altogether wrong. For it's somebody related to Edward. In short, Ariadne, it's Etienne!"

"Etienne!"

"Yes, Etienne."

"Kit, you must be dreaming! You hardly know him."

"I liked him straight off," said Kit. "And he liked me. Oh I know what you're thinking Ariadne. I know perfectly well. In fact I thought it myself. I thought it so hard indeed that I went over to Brittany to get away from it. You're thinking that of all the people in the world who are absolutely unsuited to each other Etienne and I are those people. Well you're right. We *are* unsuited to each other. That's just why we like each other. We've both come to the same conclusion—that we're so absolutely different that we can't live without each other. I'm rough. Etienne's fine. I've no manners. Etienne has loads. My mind works in jumps and strides. Etienne's flies and floats. I'm truthful. Etienne's diplomatic. I'm brusque. Etienne's tactful. I'm amusing. Etienne's dying to be amused. I'm witty. Etienne's a born listener. I'm scrupulous. Etienne's irresponsible. I'm casual. Etienne's correct. I'm hard-hearted. Etienne's kind. I always do the wrong thing, and Etienne always says the right one. I'm yielding. Etienne's obstinate. I'm ambitious. Etienne's lazy. I'm procrastinating. Etienne's prompt. And so I might go on for ever and ever. But you can see, Ariadne, from what I've told you that we really *are* made for each other, aren't we?"

"Why now you tell it me," said Ariadne naïvely, "I quite see that you are. But what I can't make

out is why I never found it out for myself. Somehow I never thought of you two in connection with each other."

"Oh, and there's another thing I forgot to say," said Kit. "Etienne's a darling! He's been loafing and idling shamefully. But he knows it. And he doesn't pretend that he hasn't. But that's all over now, I've waked him up, Ariadne. I—I've teased and harried and worried the poor boy until he's got going again. And henceforth we'll march ahead together. I've always thought that I was made for a lost cause, and in my Etienne I've found just the cause I want to help into its proper place."

"Oh Kit! How splendid you are!"

"How happy I am!" amended Kit.

"How lucky Etienne is!"

"And how lucky I am!"

"How lucky and happy you both are!"

Ariadne threw her arms impetuously round Kit's slight shoulders and swallowed her up in a long passionate hug.

"Now I come to think it of," she said, "it's the most wonderful thing that could have happened. It was just you that Etienne was waiting for all this time."

"I suppose it was," said Kit blissfully. "And now, Ariadne, this brings me to my final point. Etienne and I are going to be married immediately. He's secured a splendid appointment. He worked up a little influence and has got into the French Embassy at Vienna. We shall be poor at first but neither of us minds that. And as for me, though I've no fortune to bring the poor boy, a rather extraordinary piece of luck has happened to me. A London publishing house

has taken my book and commissioned me to write two others. Etienne—who's a judge, you know—says it's the cleverest book he's ever read. So there you are !”

As Kit was putting on her coat preparatory to leaving early after lunch, she suddenly and casually remarked that she had heard from her father that morning that Mr. Harding had not returned from abroad and the Hall was still shut up.

“ But I suppose you'll be home again soon,” she added blithely. “ Only alas, I shan't be there to see you ! ”

She was horrified when she saw how Ariadne's expression changed, how the sweet colour went sweeping out of the face that had brightened so magically since her friend's coming, and how the eyes grew suddenly wide and frightened.

But perhaps Kit had been overhasty in attributing all the tact to Etienne and putting none down to her own account, for who could have been more finely diplomatic than she at that moment when she turned away with a smile and began a brisk and animated little conversation with poor old Alexander St. John, who was pottering about the hall, trying to extract all the cheer he could from the two girls' company.

Not a question did she ask.

Not a word of comment did she utter.

And yet, by her very silence and indifference she was giving a most exquisite manifestation of the beauty of her psychic state, revealing how fair and lovely a growth she was, with delicate tendrils of such fineness and sensibility that merely through quivering into the air athwart the sunlight they played their vital part in the endless circuit of the race.

Much is talked and written about tact and sympathy ; many splendid writers have sharpened their wits on the whetstone of right thing said at the right moment ; but finer far is the thing unsaid, finer far is the glance that looks away and the art that absolutely conceals all trace of feeling.

For days afterwards Ariadne was cheered by the memory of Kit's visit, and she did her best to shed cheer around her and hide the aching of her heart.

She told herself that since Kit had noticed nothing, perhaps after all her heartache was not so bitter as it seemed.

Which was in effect, the beautiful corollary to Kit's scheme of silence.

But some weeks later, taking up the paper one morning, Ariadne read the following paragraph—

“ Amongst those who passed through town yesterday was Mr. Edward Harding, returning from abroad, on his way to Harding Hall.”

Then in a moment a determination seized her, and ten minutes later she had found an A.B.C., and looked out trains.

She dressed herself in a black coat and skirt and a small black toque ; then she went downstairs and told her father that she was going away for the day, but would be back some time that night, even if she were very late. They might have some hot milk for her when she came back, and she would not want anything else.

She found a cross-country train that brought her to Harding Station early in the afternoon, and as she stepped out on the familiar little platform a strange

feeling assailed her. It seemed to her as if Edward must be there waiting for her.

But he was not, of course ; there was no sign of him, and presently she laughed at herself bitterly for her silliness.

Hiring a fly, she set off for her drive to Harding Hall. It was a grey day, cold and lowering. No gleam of sunshine, no glimpse of blue in the sky. Everywhere there were greyish white clouds and a melancholy seemed to hang over the whole land. A slight drizzling rain began to fall.

As she drove along she stared about her with desolate eyes, recalling another drive—such a different one—her first coming to Harding Hall that warm, fragrant summer night, when the villagers had taken the horses out of their carriage and dragged it along ; and Edward had been beside her, tall and protecting, and she had dared to hope that life was going to be a success for them both. . . .

The fly drew up at last at the gates.

She alighted and, paying the man, let him go without remembering to tell him to come back for her.

Something had driven every thought out of her mind.

There, before her eyes, staring her in the face, was a huge board affixed to the front wall. She looked at it. She could scarcely believe that what she saw was really there.

Big black letters stated that Harding Hall, the magnificent property of Mr. Edward Harding, J.P., was for sale.

" For sale ! "


She said the words over to herself, and as they came fluttering from between her pale parted lips, she

staggered a little and leaned against the gate-post for support. The wind went howling through the great elms and the little larches ; it was winter now in earnest ; ice glistened on the window-panes whitely, and down in the great, bare, silent gardens a white fretwork of frost spread itself over the harsh dark ground as if to shut all the happy, smiling little flowers deep down in their graves, as if forbidding them ever to rise again.

CHAPTER XLI

IN THE LIBRARY

IN the library a big fire was burning, but the old-time air of comfort and order had undergone some strange disorganization. Dust lay thick on the books. The great silver Georgian inkstand was dirty and unpolished, the Turkey carpet had an unswept look, the waste-paper basket was overflowing with an accumulation of old letters and papers.

 Edward had thrown himself into a big chair and was gazing gloomily into the fire.

As he looked back over the events of the past days it seemed to him that some immense alteration must show in his face, so fierce, so relentless had been the suffering he had gone through.

Only so short a time ago, and he had been dreaming sweet dreams that beckoned him with alluring gestures, the while they sang softly to him of love and home, of the one woman in the world whom he wanted, of little children filling the old place with their babyish cries and laughter—his children and hers.

He laughed to himself as he remembered.

The worst of it was that he was going through a double agony all the time, for he had Arkwright on his hands. Hour by hour they pored over books and ledgers and documents, Edward and the man he had once trusted as his manager, and blacker and blacker

grew the results. Edward had all he could do to hide the dismay that attacked him, when he found the full extent of his losses, for everywhere things were worse than he expected. Speculation after speculation had been gone into by Arkwright, and had failed, and yet had been bolstered up with an almost incredible cunning and made to figure as a brilliant success. Money had been poured like water into utterly worthless concerns, simply that Arkwright might draw his huge director's fees; the South American interests were wrecked beyond all hope of recovery. Yet, with it all, Edward's kindness never failed. He had given his word. He would abide by it through thick and thin. Even when Arkwright on their way back to England broke down completely, it was Edward Harding who stayed with him, in that little lonely Italian frontier village, and nursed him back to life!

The door opened, and a man entered with the afternoon's post.

Edward took it in a dull way, but suddenly a change came over his face.

There were several letters that had been sent on from Florence, and among them were two in Ariadne's writing.

Another was from the manager of the hotel, enclosing telegrams which had arrived after his departure.

With trembling fingers Edward broke them open.

Then for the first time he learnt the truth.

Ariadne had gone to the death-bed of her brother.

He tried to realize this, but in vain. His brain was dry and clogged. No rush of relief or thankfulness came to his heart. Only a strange, apathetic lethargy

was there. Those days and nights of sleeplessness were having their revenge now.

The door opened again.

Some one tall and slight, clad in deep mourning, came quietly into the room.

She paused for a moment on the threshold.

Then she shut the door behind her and advanced towards the silent figure in the great armchair by the fire.

Edward looked at her with a blank stare, utterly devoid of any emotion.

Her voice reached him.

"Are you surprised to see me?"

It was a cold, almost harsh, voice.

"Yes," he answered.

"But you're not more surprised than I am at my coming!" she said vehemently.

He tried to gather himself together.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that after the way you have treated me, it would not be strange if I never came near you again."

He woke to the fact that she was standing, and rising to his feet, he drew a chair forward for her.

But she motioned it aside.

"No, I don't want to sit down. I feel as if I could never sit down in this house again.

"Why have you come, then?"

"I have something to say to you."

Her eyes swept round the room with a swift glance, taking in the untidiness and disorder.

"Why did you never answer my telegrams?" she said swiftly.

"I didn't get them."

"What? Not at all?"

"I left Florence two days after you. They have only just been sent on to me."

He was trying to overcome that silly numbness in his brain that made him feel half asleep.

"So you didn't get them? . . . You knew nothing of what had happened . . . of where I had gone? Where did you think I had gone?"

He had sense enough to save himself from saying what came into his mind first, but he was incapable of saying anything else instead. Standing by the fire he leaned one arm on the mantelpiece and stared down into the red glowing embers.

Ariadne watched him.

She told herself that at last she was face to face with the real Edward, and as she gazed at him with searching bitter eyes, she saw all sorts of qualities written there which she had never seen before. There was nothing kind, nothing generous in that face. All she could see was of a very different nature. Blind was she to the fact that great mental suffering it was that had driven out the light and warmth from this man's eyes and lips.

"Sandy is dead!" she said suddenly. But her voice never softened in the least, nor her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry."

Edward was waking now.

He made a movement towards her, as the full significance of what she said came home to him, but she drew back quickly.

CHAPTER XLII

ATTACK

THEY looked into each other's faces, and what they saw there was a riddle to each of them, for neither could read the other in the least.

Under all that numb feeling in Edward's brain a strange sensation was beginning to make itself felt.

He wanted to put his head on Ariadne's knee and rest it there silently, not speaking, not thinking.

"I *had* to come," said Ariadne.

"I'm glad you came."

"Glad?"

She threw back the word at him with a bitter little laugh.

"So you are letting the house?" she went on.

"Yes."

"And selling the furniture?"

"Yes."

"And you've let the house in town already?"

"Yes."

She laughed again.

"You ought to be very well off after all *that*!" she said with crude young irony. "You'll be quite a rich man if you go on at that rate."

She paused.

Edward was wondering what he ought to say to her.

Should he tell her now? Could he? He doubted it. His brain seemed unable to rise to that at present.

"And yet with all your money, you couldn't keep your promise."

"What promise?"

"You promised to send Sandy to Harrow. . . . It was your own suggestion, and the boy believed you. He counted on it. He simply lived on the idea. Then came your letter, telling him you didn't think you could do it."

She moved away, and made a few restless paces up and down. Her long black skirts swept after her, and her face, looking out of all that heavy mourning, was preternaturally white.

"That letter killed him," she said at last.

Edward stared at her in silence.

"It *killed* him!" she repeated, her voice rising under the stress of her excitement. "He went out that night, caught cold while he was wandering about alone in the meadows so that no one would see how badly he was taking the disappointment, and that cold ended in his death."

Still he was silent.

"I feel as if a veil had fallen off my eyes," went on that pitiless young voice, while the white face stared into his without a glimmer of softness or tenderness about it. "I've come to know you at last. Other people, it seems, have found you out before. Your mother, for instance, spoke to me long ago of your miserliness, but I wouldn't think such awful thoughts of you. I refused to believe that you were mean."

For a moment he seemed about to speak, but no words came.

“Meanness in a rich man,” she went on vehemently, “is the most odious, the most contemptible of all faults. And oh, if you only knew what it feels like to think that you’re married to a man who cares more about money than he does about people’s feelings—even his own mother’s—Oh, it’s horrible, horrible! It would have been so easy for you to have done this for Sandy.”

Then she broke down quite suddenly, all her fierceness vanishing at the mention of that name.

“Even though you didn’t care for me,” she sobbed, “since you had promised it, you might have done it for *him*. He was so fond of you. He asked for you at the last. His dying words were: ‘I did so want to go to Harrow.’”

“For God’s sake, *stop!*”

Edward came close to her with a sudden movement, and seized her in his arms. She struggled, but his clasp was iron.

CHAPTER XLIII

DEFENCE

“LET me go!” she said.

She struggled to release herself. In vain. She might as well have tried to break an iron chain, so closely did Edward hold her, so masterfully. She put her hands on his chest and tried to push him from her, but hers were like a child's efforts against a strong man. She was powerless. For the first time in her life she realized the immense physical strength at the disposition of a strong man, and it frightened her. It seemed like something colossal, almost unearthly, and she felt as a bird might feel breaking its wings against a wall of Parian marble.

“Now you have got to listen to me,” said Edward's voice.

But it was so changed that she could scarcely recognize it in this new strange sternness.

“I don't want to listen—I want to—to go, to get away!”

“You shall not go!”

She made another effort, but it was just as vain and ineffectual as the first one. His arms were like bands of iron; the only result of her attempt to free herself was that she felt his strength and her weakness more keenly than ever. She looked up. His face was just above hers. It was very near. But *was* it his face?

Never before had she seen him look like that. Never had she even vaguely suspected it was in him to wear such an expression as that man towering above her was wearing now. He was very pale. His lips were set. Every gleam of kindness and softness was gone from his expression. He looked as some Caesar of old might have looked on his way to battle—pale, uplifted, consumed inwardly with an intense and burning flame, that was partly a sense of keen injustice, and partly a man's personality pitting itself against the obstacle that his whole soul was determined to knock down out of his way.

"What do you think I am made of, if you suppose I am going to allow any woman—or any man either for that matter—to say the sort of things you have said to me to-day? What are you made of yourself, Ariadne?" He shook her a little as he spoke. "You! You! Are you made of flesh and blood at all that you can stab and wound another human being as you have stabbed me? Are you? I wonder. I believe you're stuffed with sawdust, like all the rest of your sex, and you're just a doll, who ought to be behind a glass case in a window where anybody with money enough can buy you. I don't believe for a moment that you've got a heart, for if you have you must be cleverer than most of your sex to disguise it with such extraordinary success."

He looked down into her face.

She was all in black, a frail, pathetic-looking figure, with a white face set round with gold-red hair that gleamed in the firelight as if it were itself a myriad of dancing flames.

"Beautiful, yes," he went on. "Oh I don't deny

that. I've never denied it. But what beauty is it? Just a mask! Ah Ariadne, it were better for you that you were plain, that your hair had no gold in it, that those soft eyes of yours were dull and lifeless, that your lips were stupid and uninviting, that your skin was not white and soft as velvet, as long as you had in the stead of all these other things, a *heart*."

"But you! What do you know of my heart?" she cried.

"Nothing."

"Exactly."

"There's nothing to be known of it."

"Then leave it out of the question."

"Easy enough that. It does not exist!"

She was angry, but her dignity forbade her to make another effort to free herself.

She stood there, limp and motionless, a black-robed figure, held in the clasp of his arms as though in a vice.

"You have no feelings, you have no womanliness, you have no sense of other people's rights and wrongs."

She was silent.

"No womanliness! With all that beauty of face and form, with all those haunting alluring little graces of yours. No womanliness. No tenderness. Just a beautiful thing made after a beautiful model, but with everything that counts left out."

A little while ago and it had been she who had said all the bitter things, and he who had listened and made no reply. But of the two it was she alone who listened with the strange and quickening interest, almost as though she were hanging on his words, and eagerly waiting for this description of herself.

"Go back a little," he continued. "Think how

you came to marry me! It's scarcely courteous of me, I admit, but we're going for truths now, not for courtesy. You took your sister's place at the altar, and became my wife, so that your family would benefit by your marriage."

He put his hand under her chin, and lifting her face looked straight into her eyes as he spoke.

"Isn't it true?" he asked.

Her lip trembled.

"Cruel, cruel!" she breathed. "You know I sacrificed myself to save my people."

He laughed.

"Did it ever occur to you, I wonder, that it was not you who were the only sacrificed one?"

"What do you mean?"

"My meaning is obvious."

Again her lip quivered.

"You mean you were sacrificed too," she said faintly.

"I do."

He waited a moment, but his eyes held hers all the time, and his expression never softened for a moment.

"If ever a man was abominably treated," he said, "I was that man, and although months have passed, and I have never said it to you before, Ariadne, that makes no difference to the truth. It is as clear to-day as it was then. It was not *you* who were the victim. It was *I*. Yet it is you who have been decking yourself out in self-bestowed laurels and ribbons, who have been looking upon yourself as the wonderful one, who took a heavy burden upon your shoulders with vast unselfishness. I ought I suppose, to have been prepared for it from the first. But somehow . . . somehow . . . I thought you were made of different

stuff. I always believed the day would come when you would give me my due, when you would realize that I had played my part fairly well. I think I may honestly say that there are not many men in the world who would have treated a woman as considerately as I treated your sister. I saved you from scandal. I allowed the wrong she had done me to remain hidden from the world. I took the whole thing on my own shoulders, doing my level best to shield you both in every way."

He paused.

The vast silence in the library seemed to wrap them round like a cloud. In the grate the red fire was getting dim now and twilight was beginning to steal about the room, blotting out with tender magic fingers the sharp outlines of the chairs and desks. Only from the books that lined the walls from floor to ceiling did more light come, and that gleamed from the bits of gold and silver in their bindings where the fire caught them and mirrored itself in faint glows. No footman appeared to light the lamps. Outside, the house was as silent as death, but away in some far distance could be heard the sound of hammering.

As Ariadne heard it she shivered.

That, and the vast silence! . . . What was it they brought back to her? All of a sudden, with a pitiless hand, they flung across her heart the memories of that hammering in the little bedroom of the Manor. . . . Of all sounds that strike the human heart with grief and terror, surely that knocking on the coffin lid as it closes down for the last time over the face of the loved one is the most unforgettable, the most unnerving. . . .

She shut her eyes, and she saw Sandy's thin freckled face for a moment, and a wave of wild longing swept over her to see and speak to the boy just once again. . . . Then all the incidents of the past few days came rushing back . . . his illness, her sudden flight from Italy to see him, her arrival, his death, and those dying words of his . . . they sounded in her ears again, "I did so want to go to Harrow!"

She opened her eyes and looked up again at Edward.

"All that you say," she said steadily, "is no excuse for you, though it may be perfectly true. It has nothing to do—with—these other things—these things I've come to say to you to-day."

"So you go back to that?"

His right arm held her in that same hard grip and again his left hand lifted her face and forced her eyes to look into his.

"Your charge against me is that I am mean and miserly, is it not? . . ."

"Not only I, but others," she replied. "My father . . . your own mother . . . your treatment of Sandy . . . everything!"

Quietly he studied her. The mocking smile played about his lips still.

"And you believe it?"

He waited for her answer.

"You believe it?" he repeated insistently, his hold tightening a little as he spoke. "Answer me. I wish to have it from your lips in a plain yes or no. Do you believe that I am mean and miserly, that I treated your father badly, that I haven't fulfilled my duty to my mother, that I've miserably broken my promise to a child? Do you believe all that?"

For one breathless moment there was a silence, and Ariadne's head, drooping forward from sheer exhaustion, lay against his arm ; the feel of that rough tweed coat under her cheek gave her a strange sensation ; just for a moment there seemed to flash before her eyes that old sweet, sweet vision of what it would be like to love Edward and be loved by him ; then she drove it from her ; she raised her head and looked up into his face.

" Yes, I believe it," she said.

If she had expected him to show distress she was disappointed. His face never changed. The smile still hovered mockingly about his lips. But slowly his arms dropped away from her and he stepped back.

" So that is your last word," he said after a moment. " You believe all that against me ? You believe it simply because it seems so to you. You believe it in spite of all you know of me. In spite of the months you have lived in the same house with me, in spite of what you have gathered of my life. You don't wonder. You don't question. You simply accept as Gospel truth these damnable facts against me. You see me as a monster. You brand me as that most contemptible of all God's creatures, a miserly man, a man who puts money before all the claims of home and love and friendship. It never occurs to you that here again you may be making a mistake. It never strikes you for a moment that if I have been what you call mean there may have been a reason for it ? "

She made a little sudden step towards him.

" What reason could there be ? " broke from her pale trembling lips.

" You ask too late ! " said Edward.

He moved away to the mantelpiece and deliberately lit a cigarette.

Then all of a sudden it seemed to Ariadne as if a mist that had been obscuring her vision began to drift away, and through the vague moving cloud she saw Edward's face as she had never seen it before. He was standing over there by the mantelpiece, staring into the fire, the while he puffed carelessly at his cigarette, and her eyes were able to rest upon him wholly without fear of meeting his glance. At first the expression in those eyes of hers was merely wretched, as it had been all through this scene; but gradually something else came into her regard. She was looking at him searchingly now, hungrily. It seemed to her as if she were drinking in that face as a man who is dying with thirst drinks the water held to his lips.

Even now, in these moments of anger and bitterness, there was nothing in that face that was not generous, noble even. He was pale, and the shrewd blue of his eyes was hidden from her, but she could rest her eyes on his forehead, on the expression of the eyes beneath under their down-dropped lids, of the clean-shaved mouth and the chin and all the lines of the face. Yes. It was the face of a kind, strong man.

Supposing that she was wrong—that they were all wrong—that they were judging where they had no right to do so.

Edward turned and looked at her.

"It is growing dark," he said quietly. "Shall I order the brougham to take you back to the station? Or have you a fly waiting?"

She stared at him paralysed, and murmured something inaudible which he took to be "Yes."

"I will try and come over to the Manor and see you and your father some time within the next few days. I shall probably be leaving England shortly. There's just one thing I want to say to you. You're settlement remains yours. I intend to resign my trusteeship and to place the money entirely at your disposal as soon as the deed of trust is annulled."

Mechanically, like one in a dream she moved towards the door, which he opened for her. He made no effort to shake hands. He simply bowed and said quietly, "Good-bye." Almost before she knew it she was out in the garden and passing down the walk between the great cypress trees towards the gate.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE FACE BY THE FIRE

IT was raining now, a little light, fine rain that spread itself over the land like mist, turning the trees that were so black and leafless into pale ghostly-looking things, while the grass and the ground itself even assumed a sort of sickly whiteness. It was cold too. Ariadne drew her furs around her and shivered a little. On and on she went. She had no fly waiting for her, as Edward had believed. But she was scarcely aware of what she was doing. It was growing dark and the long road stretched out before her endlessly. She had lost all sense of time and space. She had almost forgotten her own identity. All she could see was that face as it looked down into the fire—Edward's face.

Over and over again her mind revolved round the whole story, but her confusion simply increased the more she tried to think. It was true that he had broken his promise to Sandy. It was true that he had written Dad that letter. It was true that he had let his house in town. It was true that he was selling Harding Hall. It was true that he had spoken of economies, both to her and to his mother. All those things were true, and since they were true they were contemptible in a man of his wealth.

And yet—there was that face . . .

She stumbled onwards. The rain fell ceaselessly.

To right and left of her stretched the drear sad fields and meadows where huge shapes of cattle loomed indistinctly every now and then through the dusk.

It was a long way to the station, and she was tired. She had eaten nothing since breakfast, and she had a long journey yet before her if she wished to get back to the Manor that night. It seemed as if she had been going on like this for centuries. Always this wet white road had run on like this and she had crept along it, every moment taking her further and further away from that pale stern face by the fire . . . further and further away from him she was going . . . she knew that she was leaving him, not just for the present, but for ever.

At last the station's dim watery lights appeared in view and her journey—that part of it at least—was at an end.

Wet through, her skirts clinging heavily about her, she crept into the waiting-room where a big fire was burning and stood there miserably shivering in its warmth.

Where was she going?

Her brain was all in a tangle. She was incapable of planning or knowing.

She tried to think it out clearly.

But there it was again—Edward's face!

She walked out of the waiting-room and went and looked up and down the road. Not a soul was in sight. The solitary fly was nowhere to be seen. Vaguely she stood there looking about her for several moments.

The station-master came out of his room, and seeing her, started.

"Are you waiting for your train, madam?" he inquired courteously.

"No," said Ariadne.

Then, the moment she had said the word, a sudden pulse of life seemed to beat in her brain, and next instant she had turned and was walking back into the gloom, back towards Harding Hall.

CHAPTER XLV

HOME IN THE NIGHT

"I know not too well how I found my way home in the night,
There were witnesses, cohorts about me, to left and to right,
Angels, powers, the unuttered, unseen, the alive, the aware."

Browning.

OUT in the road once more—on and on.

All over that endless, weary way again ; and the rain still falling, falling, falling ; and darkness gathering and creeping down more and more swiftly over the silent, dripping world.

It was quite dark when she passed through the great gateway, and went up the cypress avenue towards the house. The front door stood open and she crept in, her strength almost finished. A portmanteau was lying on the rug near the door stamped with the initials J. B. She stared at it in a dull fashion and the next moment became aware that Sir James Bond was standing a short distance away from her.

"Mrs. Harding !" in a shocked tone. "Why, my dear lady, you're wet through !"

"Yes, I am wet."

She looked at him pitifully.

"I have just arrived," he said. "I have come down to stay the night. Surely it could not have been you that I drove past on the road, walking along on foot through all that rain ?"

"Yes, it was I," she said dully. "I came from the station. I tried to go away but I couldn't. I had to come back—I *had* to."

"Go away? Do you mean go away from your husband?" asked Sir James quickly, not mincing words.

"Yes."

"I should have thought that your place at this moment would have been at his side," said Sir James.

She was speechless.

"Here is he, a ruined man! Surely the tenderness and sympathy of a wife are needed at such a moment as this. But perhaps you did not really mean that you were going away from him. Tell me, Mrs. Harding, what *did* you mean?"

But Ariadne interrupted sharply.

"What do you mean by ruined?" she cried, in a strange, loud voice that frightened the great lawyer somehow, he could scarcely tell why. "Edward, *ruined*? How ruined? What do you mean?"

"Why do you ask me that? Surely you understand!"

"Tell me what you mean by ruined?" Ariadne cried in a still louder voice.

"Mrs. Harding, pray don't be agitated! Let me assure you that your fortune is secure. Alas, if it could only have been used by Mr. Harding he would perhaps have tided himself over this crisis. But he would never consent to that, though I did my best, I must confess, to persuade him to do so."

She sprang towards him and clutched his coat-sleeve.

"What are you saying?" Her voice was hoarse,

and shook. "What are you saying, Sir James? Do you mean that he—that he has *lost* his money?"

"Good God!"

"*Has* he?"

"You don't mean to say you don't know about it? Is it possible that Harding has kept his affairs from you?"

"I've been away. I've not seen him," she gasped.

Then she added, "And he did not know where I was."

Before Sir James could speak she was across the hall, rushing along the corridor to the library.

She opened the door and almost fell into the room.

"Edward!"

Her voice tried to raise itself, but the whisper was so small that even she could scarcely hear it.

But away across the room she saw him.

He was seated at a desk surrounded by papers. His face looked grey and set. All of a sudden he seemed to have become an old man, and as she stumbled towards him the room grew into an endless waste, across which her feet were almost too weak to carry her; but still she stumbled on—she *must* reach him, she must tell him.

CHAPTER XLVI

“ AT THE DIFFICULT MINUTE, SNATCH ”

SHE stood there, a wet, dripping figure in her sodden clinging black garments, with hands outstretched, and that pitiful cry hovering on her lips, “ I have come back—I couldn’t go ! ”

Centuries seemed to come and go as she stood there waiting, her eyes on Edward’s. As in a dream she saw the long, closely-written letter that he was holding in his hand—he had been reading it when she came in. And now his eyes went from her to the letter, then back again from the letter to her, and all the while she stood there waiting.

“ Ariadne ! ”

She heard her name, but it was breathed out in a voice that she could scarcely believe was Edward’s, so changed was it from the tone in which he had spoken to her when they parted.

He was rising from his seat at the desk—he was coming towards her ; now she was frightened ; she shrank back, fearing she knew not what.

But still he came on, and she saw that his face was lit with a strange radiance.

Then he reached her.

“ Thank God ! Thank God ! ” she heard him say.

All around them stretched the silent library, with its mighty array of books, into which most splendid in-

tellects of the world had poured the result of all their researches and philosophies, their histories, their criticisms, their biographies and autobiographies, their science and their art, and their belief in beauty and goodness and truth, and their solutions of the problem yclept Life. But what were all their writings worth compared to the living drama being played out right in front of their silent, crowded shelves ?

She lifted her face and looked up into his pitifully.

She began to speak—stumbling over the words.

“ I—I went all the way to the station—there was no fly, and so I walked. . . . And all the time I thought of you—your face haunted me. . . . Then, somehow, I knew we had all been making a terrible mistake—that you were good, so good, so——”

And still he looked at her.

At first his face was dim before her eyes. She had no clear notion of how he looked. But gradually she saw him, saw his eyes, his lips, his brow.

She knew now that something had happened, that there was something almost dazzling in the depths of those blue eyes.

“ So I came back.”

“ Why ? ”

“ I had to. A hand seemed to make me. I wanted to look at you again, to see your eyes, to know——”

“ To know what ? ”

“ To know everything ! ”

“ What do you mean by everything ? ”

She paused, overcome suddenly by unutterable confusion beneath his tone and look. He stood there tall and strong, and the sense of her own weakness and fatigue awakened curiously at the sight of his

strength. She was so tired, so tired. What she wanted to say to him eluded her. She swayed a little.

Then, roughly almost, Edward had caught her.

She was against his breast.

His arms closed round her and she shut her eyes, incapable of thinking any longer.

Only she could *feel*—feel those arms and that clasp, feel the coat under her cheek and the heart beating there, feel the sudden marvellous sensation of unutterable well-being that came sweeping through her like a tide, driving everything else before it, but the thought that these were Edward's arms.

He was whispering over her head.

"Bellairs has written and told me everything . . . how he came to the Hall that night and shot me, under the belief that I had married Alice . . . how trying to get away he fell in the wood and sprained his ankle and crawled into the empty cottage and was nursed back to life so bravely by you. He calls you an angel, Ariadne. . . . He begs me to be good to you . . . Alice has told him you are unhappy! . . . He says he has come at last to the conclusion that your unhappiness may spring in part from the fact that you've been keeping such a secret from me. And so he has told me himself. . . . That's what he has written. . . . And I—I feel the most despicable of creatures."

"So William's told you!"

It was all she could say.

For the truth was she could think of nothing but Edward's heart beating so near to hers.

"I was a mean cur," Edward's voice went on. "I thought it was Etienne whom you used to disappear

so mysteriously to meet down there. And there's worse still. I thought you were in love with Etienne! I suffered from a jealousy that defies all words to describe. It was a physical thing that swamped my brain and affected me like a blow over the eyes. I fought against it. But it was stronger than myself at times. And all the while you were an angel—a heroine!"

"Oh don't! . . . It's you who are the wonderful one. . . . You've let us all say dreadful things of you and you never once defended yourself. . . . But why was it? Why didn't you tell us—tell me, at any rate—that your business affairs were going wrong?"

"So you know that now, do you?" he said, and she heard with wonder the unconcern in his voice. "Who told you?"

"Sir James Bond, in the hall just a few moments ago when I came in out of the rain. Thank God, though, that I came back to tell you I believed in you before I learnt the truth!"

"Yes, thank God for that! Well, there was a man involved whom I wished to shield as far as possible. His father saved my father's life at the cost of his own, and my father had enjoined on me never to forget to show gratitude to that man's son. And so I kept the whole thing as secret as possible. Besides, I always had the hope—rather a forlorn one—that I might be able to pull through in time. And so I went muddling on, and it seems to me that I made a pretty absurd mess of it all."

In the background of his mind a voice was telling him that he *must* make her change her clothes, mad-

deningly sweet though it was to have her so near to him, looking at him with those great soft tear-dimmed eyes of hers.

"Nothing of yours has been touched yet, I believe," he told her suddenly. "You will find everything in your rooms just as you left them, if you will go and change."

He was still holding her.

"But I must go," she said a little wildly.

She moved back from him now.

"Go! Go where?"

"Go home."

"Home!"

"Yes. They—they're waiting for me."

"Who?"

"Dad! And all the rest of them."

"So you are going back to them?"

"I—I told them I would be back to-night."

But even as she uttered the words she knew that never, never again was Fate going to allow her to act with such arrant folly towards this man as had characterized her dealings with him heretofore. Never again was she going to fall into the trap of keeping silent when speech might make all the difference to their two lives.

Strange words came leaping to her tongue, as her eyes and Edward's met. She was stumbling over them, hurrying, rushing, as if afraid that she might be suddenly stricken with dumbness and never have the chance again to utter them.

"I love you, I love you! Oh Edward, Edward, Edward! Love me a little in return!"

Her arms went out towards him.

They wound themselves about his neck and clung there.

Then Heaven, so long denied them, opened before them in their kiss.

CHAPTER XLVII

FESTA

IN another part of the house, Sir James Bond, the discreetest of men, was solacing himself for his host's absence in a big armchair at the side of a blazing fire, with his feet stretched luxuriously towards the warmth, a fragrant cigar between his lips, and a tantalus and syphon at his elbow. If he wondered whether there would be any dinner at Harding Hall that night, he mastered his misgivings cheerfully, for he was a man of the world and a great lawyer, and he knew with an unerring certainty that Edward and Ariadne had reached a crisis in their life-story, and he firmly believed that the crisis was about to be a reconciliation. He sighed and smiled, and sipped his whisky-and-soda, and wondered a little at the quixotism of Edward Harding, but was glad that he was neither too old yet nor too cynical to appreciate its beauty.

What a dinner they had that night, those three—Edward, Ariadne, Sir James!

A golden cord seemed to stretch between them, holding things together with some strange, almost unearthly magic, in which Sir James participated just as they did.

They were all in the highest spirits, and anything less like the dinner of a ruined household could scarcely

be imagined! The best wines came up from the cellar, the plate that had been packed away was brought forth again, flowers were cut in reckless profusion from the sacred hothouses until the table looked like a spring field in the middle of which the great gold candlesticks, shaded with pale yellow silk, shed their soft gold light on the happy faces gathered round the board.

"This dinner," said Sir James, who had had a few whispered words with Ariadne just before the gong sounded—"this dinner, in spite of all its delicate, fairylike qualities and the light hand of the French chef, has a prosaic business significance attached to it. It marks a transaction."

"What are you talking about?" said Edward, a little mystified by the great man's oration, which evidently, from his dry, quizzical manner, had a hidden meaning.

"Mrs. Harding understands," said Sir James, "Mrs. Harding knows."

"Yes," murmured Ariadne, smilingly.

She had put on a gown of black filmy chiffon, and her gleaming neck was set off by a single rope of pearls, but her white arms were bare, and needed no jewellery to show off their beauty. She was radiant, a light was sparkling in her eyes, her lips curved in happy smiles. She was the picture of a young and beautiful woman, who loves and knows herself beloved, and Edward scarcely took his eyes off her.

"What do you know?" he said to her softly.

"Mrs. Harding has consulted me legally about a little matter which I have promised to settle up for her," answered Sir James. "She wishes to make over

her settlement completely for the patching up of what we shall politely describe as 'the little smash.' "

He raised his glass of *Veuve Clicquot*.

"To the reconstruction of the future," he said quietly.

His old blue eyes grew a little misty, a faint tremor played about those precise-looking legal lips. Away in front of him a vision was stretching—such a tantalizing, fair, enticing vision! He saw it through the mist, and his heart ached for a moment, and he ceased to be a wise and illustrious lawyer, and became just a lonely old man, looking into the future that was opening out for another, not for himself. . . .

"To the future!" said Edward.

"To the future!" echoed Ariadne.

And as they drank their sparkling golden *Veuve Clicquot* each and all of them saw one and the same vision—the old man, the young man, and the beautiful girl-wife. They saw a home where a tired heart could creep for comfort, where the world, with all its coldness and harshness and criticisms, was shut far out, where little feet pattered, and little hands clung, where friends gathered sure of a welcome, where the best that life can offer any one grew as in some sheltered garden, and flowered all through the long darkness of the winters as well as in the joyous days of spring and summer—the flowers of love and trust.

Ariadne rose quietly and slipped away, leaving the two men to their cigars and port.

She stole into the drawing-room and made her way to the great pianoforte, for it seemed to her that nothing but music could express the elation flooding her heart and soul. She drifted from one thing to another, and

finally wandered off into Schumann's "Carnaval," which she had played to Edward that evening long ago when she had thought he cared so little about her and her music. . . .

Presently she stopped playing, and drawing a letter from her pocket, began to read. And as she read she laughed irresistibly.

THE SCHLOSS.

DEAREST ARIADNE !

Etienne has been sent for summarily to London and I'm putting in a week here in the Tyrol. Arrived to-day from Vienna. There's always a certain excitement about the first meal in a new hotel. Who will be there? Any men? Any women worth talking of? Any one pretty, witty or well-dressed? One always hopes great things. Alas! One always meets with disappointment.

To-day is no exception. I went in to dinner at one o'clock. My heart sank. Everybody was over a hundred. If I had added up all their ages they would have run to thousands. And not a man!

"Good for the wardrobe if bad for the spirits," I decided. "I shall save on my clothes if I lose in my fun."

Tuesday.

These women are all angels. So good! I wish I were more like them, for Etienne's sake. Such politeness! Every one bows and smiles, bows and smiles

"How did you sleep?"

The query goes up and down the table. Every one shakes the recesses of her brain and brings out a reply.

"I lay awake all night because the smell of the stables was strong in the air."

“ And you, Fräulein, did you sleep well ? ”

“ Not very ! ”

But I have discovered that one *should* sleep well. The old, old ladies are offended if one doesn't. They have been coming to the Schloss every summer for forty years, and one has to be careful what one says, *very* careful. I have given offence. I must beware. I *must* sleep well.

Tuesday night.

This Schloss was an Emperor's residence in 1500. The great dining-room has plain white boards, a grand piano, infinite space and the most magnificent views from all its windows. Under the jutting blue canopy, lined with gold scroll-work, the Emperor received the Venetian Ambassadors, hundreds of years ago.

And to-day it's all a *pension*. From Italy, from Germany, from Russia, from England, from America, Pensioners come here to spend summer, cheaply, comfortably, with great mountains frowning behind, and a wide, glad valley smiling away before. A place to be happy in ? I'll try.

But is it possible to be happy with mid-day dinner ? That's what I'm wondering. I don't know any philosopher who tackles that question. I'll wait and find out.

Wednesday.

Two men are coming. They'll be here to-night in time for supper. I heard it from Hedwig. To tell the truth I ask her every morning is any one *new* expected.

Wednesday afternoon.

To-day for dinner we had soup with little dumplings

in it ; pork with sweet stewed cabbage ; little dishes of stewed apricots and plums ; roast veal, celery in vinegar, boiled potatoes, cold beans ; sweet fritters ; great mugs of beer.

“ No ; it is *not* possible. I feel certain of that. I am not absolutely miserable. I am worse. I am hopeless. When they handed me stewed apricots with my veal I nearly cried.

It's all very well for Etienne to leave me here while he goes off on an exciting mission—that may result in his going out to Australia to live. He says this is the very place for me. *Is it ?*

The following conversation went on at lunch—I mean dinner.

Russian Baroness : What are these things in the soup ?

German Fräulein : Knoodles (or a word like that).

Other German Fräulein (eagerly) : Is it not *very* good ?

Other German Fräulein : It is *very* good.

English Old Maid : Is this pork or mutton ?

American Old Maid : I guess it's pork. It's mighty hard.

American Widow (of four husbands) : It's veal, seems to me.

Eldest of the Fraus : Pork should always be hard (severely).

American Young Old Thing : As long as it's good meat I guess that's all that matters.

Eldest of the Fräuleins (glaring) : The meat is *always* good.

Other Fräuleins : *Always !* (With concentrated glares.)

(They all begin to argue and quarrel then, and snap and scratch.)

Russian Baroness: I shall go. The food is not good. I shall go to Montreux. There is there a nice hotel, where many high-born English ladies go, who certainly make it rather low. But the food is good."

Afterwards the Baroness explains to the terribly agitated English Old Maid that she didn't mean *low*: she meant *slow*.

The American Young Old Thing says she will leave to-morrow, they're so rude. She *never* said the meat wasn't good.

Wednesday night.

The men have come.

I simply couldn't recognize any one when I went into the *salon*. Transformation! It was wonderful. A wind had blown through the Schloss and tossed ribbons, flowers, necklaces, curls, crimps, face-powder, indiscriminately all over every one. In addition to all that, every one was wreathed in smiles.

As I am the latest comer the men are put next to me. I find them a couple of nice, uninteresting young Englishmen, on their way to mountain-climbing. One is good-looking, one isn't. The good-looking one is nearest me. We talk together. They tell me their names, so that I can give the maid an order about their letters as they can't speak German. In exchange I tell them mine.

"Mrs. Bouleran."

Is it fancy? Or does a stir go round our be-flowered and be-jewelled table?

After dinner I heard two Fräuleins talking to two Fraus. I am certain they were talking about me.

"Is she a widow?" "She doesn't look like one."
"She gave us to understand she was a miss."
"Well, it has nothing to do with me. But——" "Far be it from me to say anything. But——"

"Isn't the moon lovely?" I said. They all started. I knew it was I.

It was just then it dawned on me that I'm always supposed to look so well in this old black home-made frock!

Thursday.

Another male being has come, a boy. He's fifteen and English and is travelling with his mother.

I smiled at him at dinner. I saw he wanted two helpings of everything, and I encouraged him. These maiden ladies live on bread and vegetables, and look with disgust on healthy appetites.

After lunch the two men went out, and the forty maiden ladies, widows, and young ladies, discussed them. I rather like to hear maiden ladies discussing, so I wrote a letter and listened.

"How long are they going to stay?"

"— has such queer manners. I bowed, and he didn't return my bow."

"Go to bed without saying good-night."

"Very nice indeed . . . asked me the German for 'What time is dinner?'"

"Rather good-looking . . . nice smile. I told him goître was caused by drinking the water here . . . I advised him not to . . . said he never drank water and I was very kind . . ."

"I think the other better-looking."

Thursday night.

Had a conversation with the boy.

"I say, this is a rum place, isn't it? Lots of *cats*."

"Yes. Nice and quiet and good for the health. And *lovely* views."

"But I say, what a collection of——"

"Sh!"

"What's the matter with the housemaid?"

"She has *goître*. Every second person has up here."

"Well I never saw such a lot of old women. Blest if I know how they manage to get up these hills."

"Miss Forbes isn't so old. She's supposed to be pretty."

"Pretty! *Pretty*!! I say, I'll tell you what I'd do to her and then she mightn't be bad-looking. I'd get her by the scruff of the neck, don't you know, and drag her head back, and I'd put my knee against her waist, and stiffen her out in the other direction. . . ."

There is something delightfully definite about boys. I can see Miss Forbes when he has finished with her.

It was she who asked me how long I had been a widow!

Friday.

The men have gone. So has the boy. To-day, a German *Fräulein* asked me the meaning of "*eggad*," an English word.

I said I had never heard such a word. Was it in cooking? Perhaps she meant *egged* and *floured*.

No, it was *not* in cooking. It was in a great English historical work. She was very angry.

How was it spelt?

E-g-a-d.

Oh *yes*. Of course.

"You do know the word then? What does it mean?"

I am unable to explain. How can one explain the meaning of "egad"?

"It is an exclamation, and never used," I murmur.

But she doesn't believe me. It is so easy to say a word is never used when one doesn't know the meaning of it. I read that in her eye. I am lost. In addition to being everything else I am ignorant of my own language! Exciting, rather. The air bristles.

Sunday.

The Schloss is at loggerheads.

Nobody speaks to any one she spoke to a week ago.

There has been a great quarrel, a war indeed. An American changed her seat at table, and the fight broke out. It was an unforgivable thing to do that, to change your seat. Really, it's an awful thing to shut a lot of women up together like this.

I look round for the sweet, peaceful, polite old things of a hundred and over. They are gone. A lot of harpies have come in their places. Every one is going to leave. The tension is terrific.

Every remark, no matter how small, goes off as if loaded.

"Were there many people here last September?" I ask the head of the Fraus, a professor's widow, by way of making a little conversation.

"There were some very *nice* people here," she replies.

I'm not sure if she thinks I'm insulting her or she is merely meaning to insult me.

This can't last.

Monday.

Two left this morning. Three went after lunch. Etienne arrives at six. Angels, indeed!

Monday night.

Etienne has come.

I ran downstairs to meet him, and nearly fell into his arms. He said "Darling" and gave me a great hug. I said "Darling" too.

Just then a Frau Professor and a Frau Doctor went upstairs. I started guiltily, and said in a calm clear voice to Etienne, "What dreadful heat they are having in London!"

Monday night later.

I went into the great dining-room just before supper. Imagine my surprise.

The transformation had returned.

Every one had broken out into flowers and beads and lace again, just as they did when the two men came.

What can it mean?

The Frau Professor was talking to the Frau Doctor. They stopped. They looked at me. Then they looked away.

I took no notice. I asked Hedwig, "Will you please put the Herr next to me on my right?"

She stared at me, quite frightened. "On my *right*," I repeated. I went away to get Etienne.

We came in together ten minutes later, and what had happened? Etienne's place was set three places away from me. Three Absolute Cats between us.

"Come and sit on the other side of me," said Etienne in his loud cheerful voice.

The whole table shivered.

The Frau Doctor and the Frau Professor looked positively apoplectic, especially in the region of the fifth chin. It was they who had countermanded my order.

"I like my wife next me," said Etienne, directly addressing the Frau Professor.

In his loudest tones, he says to me :

"Kit, what rotten beer they give you here !"

I never in my life heard a remark that seemed to me as brave as that.

I look up and catch the Frau Doctor's eye.

Ah, now I understand ! She had been telling them all that she caught me kissing a *strange man* !

Tuesday.

Another transformation.

All the nice, affable, polite, bowing old ladies have come back. Every one is as sweet as possible. The harpies have disappeared, and one can say "Isn't the butter a little salt ?" without being eaten alive. The air is cleared. The tension is gone.

It's all Etienne.

What they wanted here was a man ; but not a man about whom there could possibly be any doubts ; not a man that might belong to one any more than to another ; not a man that could arouse vanities, envies, hopes and fears. Just a *man*, wholesome, decided, loud-voiced, who said the beer was rotten and ordered cold beef when there wasn't enough to eat, and was well-mannered to the woman on his right—in a word, —Etienne !

* * * * *

We get on splendidly, Etienne and I. He's a dear, really, Ariadne, though he did let the locusts get such wholesale bites at some one of his bygone years !

Write to me soon, a long letter, with everything that

I want to know in it, especially about your dear, sweet, angelic self. And now that I'm at the very other end of Europe, Ariadne, dear, I'm going to have the cheek to say something I often wanted to say at Harding Hall, but somehow never dared to. I never saw two people more in love with each other than you and Mr. Harding, but I never saw two people more intent on obscuring the obvious fact.

Your friend,
KIT.

* * * * *

Ariadne's lips curved in a smile.

She put dear old Kit's letter in her pocket and went back to the piano, and as she played on, she was again in Edward's arms. . . . Kit's "obvious fact" should never be obscured any more.

CHAPTER XLVIII

WORLD FORGETTING

A FOOTMAN came towards her.

“ Mrs. Allistone is here, madam ; she wishes to know if you would see her for a moment.”

Ariadne stared at the man in amazement.

She had actually forgotten that there was such a person in the world as Lallie Allistone, and it took her a moment to realize what James was saying.

Before she could speak a gay, high-pitched voice broke in on her :

“ My dear, forgive me, I followed the man in. I was so anxious to see you, Ariadne ; such ages since we met ! ”

There stood the tall, dashing-looking Lallie, wearing a rain-proof cloak over her black evening gown, while her head was bare, and decorated in a rather bizarre fashion, with a great rope of scarlet beads, and an enormous scarlet poppy low down towards the back of her chignon. She glided forward, hands outstretched, and a smile on her lips.

The man left the room. The door was closed.

Ariadne and Lallie were alone together.

Immediately a change came over Lallie's face.

Leaning forward she grasped Ariadne's arm and held it in a fevered clutch, and the girl saw now that the great black eyes were worn, in spite of all their

glittering brightness there were dark hollows underneath them.

"I heard you were here," began Lallie. "A friend from town came down in the same train with you. He dined with me, and has just driven back to the station. I made him drop me here, and the fly will call for me on its way back. So I've not come to honour you with a great deal of my company, my dear. And now, first of all, what do you mean by treating me like this? Have you, or have you not, got that money?"

That, too, had gone out of Ariadne's mind.

But somehow, all of a sudden she felt so terribly sorry for this woman, and if it had not been that she knew now of Edward's difficulties, she would actually have asked him for the money that very evening, just out of sheer compassion.

But she could not do that; it would be too unfair to Edward,

And, besides—

"Why are you smiling like that?" said Mrs. Allistone, roughly. "An idiotic smile, I call it!"

Ariadne was silent.

"I suppose you mean that you haven't got the money, and don't mean to get it?"

"I'm sorry, but that is how it is," said Ariadne gently.

"You little cat!"

Lallie hissed the words out recklessly.

"You've stolen everything from me, and yet you dare to refuse me that paltry service."

"*Stolen?*"

Ariadne repeated the word, while a flash came into those soft eyes of hers.

"You've stolen Etienne," Lallie went on violently. "I could have done what I liked with him. He would have married me to-morrow if I would have let him. And you, with your little canting, white-faced treachery, came between us! You turned him from a charming, attractive man into a contemptible prig! All he thinks of now is what he calls '*leading a better life*' with that horrible O'Dowell wife of his!"

She laughed mockingly.

"And he dared to tell me," she added, "that *you* were the one who is responsible for the great change that has taken place in him. Oh la, la! He makes me tired! And you—you make me more than tired! Whatever I may be, I'm not a hypocrite; I don't pretend to be better than my neighbours. I am not surprised to hear that Edward is selling Harding Hall and going abroad, and that a separation has been arranged between you. What else could one expect! I know Edward. He was madly in love with me, and that love has never died. He told me so only a short time ago, when we travelled up together in the train. . . ."

A voice broke in from the door as they stood there face to face, these two tall, beautiful women, in the great candle-lit drawing-room.

"Madam, your fly is waiting," said the voice.

Lallie uttered a shriek.

"Edward! How you frightened me!"

Edward came forward leisurely.

"I'm sorry, but, as I said before, your fly is at the door."

He touched the bell, and a footman appeared.

"Show Mrs. Allistone to her fly," Edward said quietly.

And Lallie ?

One wild look she gave round the room, and then, with a mocking little laugh, she waved her hand airily to Ariadne.

"Good-night, fair Hypocrite !" she said ; and to Edward, "Good-night, Sir Prig !"

Then she went floating out of the room, shutting the door behind her with what sounded suspiciously like a bang.

But they— !

It is to be doubted if they even heard her, for they were in each other's arms by then and the world was fading from their vision.

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